interzone

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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NINA ALLAN'S TIME PIECES · JONATHAN McCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED · WAYNE HAAG INTERVIEWED
DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK · TONY LEE'S LASER FODDER · NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN · BOOK ZONE

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SPOILERAMA BY TONY LEE

As you know, *Laser Fodder* reviews sometimes give away the major plot-points of movies and TV shows without any *don't look now* warning for the reader (or a disclaimer of responsibility for the possibility that my reviews might spoil a viewer's fun). Online comments, especially in forum threads or social networking discussions, are habitually focussed upon almost hysterical overreactions against spoilers. But, to me, the complaints are usually from angry morons apparently incapable of seeking or finding anything of worth in a movie besides its most obvious themes as a storytelling entertainment. Wrapped around the various elements of comedy, tragedy, antagonist, protagonist, corruption, redemption, anticipation and resolution, contrarian author/journalist Christopher Booker's 2004 book about 'why we tell stories' suggested there are seven basic plots. More famously, one assertion (commonly attributed to Russian literary realist Dostoyevsky) is that a fictional work might be identified as one of only two stories: a hero goes on a journey; there's a stranger in town. With these thoughts in mind, it sounds ridiculous to grumble about spoilers having a profoundly negative impact upon a viewer's enjoyment of a movie.

Obviously, movies are not competitive sports. It should not and really does not matter if you already know the final score. Any movie that depends wholly, or in part, upon narrative twists for a majority of its merit as popular or artistic entertainment is quite probably badly flawed or lacking much genuinely cinematic appeal. There are plenty of movies with dialogue-free storytelling, and lots of single images in movies can express concepts, whether intellectual or emotional, which are difficult to describe in less than a proverbial 1,000 words. So, I wonder, how can a review – usually of just two or three hundred words – result in so much damage to anyone's viewing pleasure? Angry claims that a movie is spoilt or ruined by reviewers' comments rarely make good sense. Watching is not reading. Conveying atmosphere, characterisation, allegories or symbolism in movies is far too sophisticated a process to be wrecked or even stung by a mere handful of words on a page.

Please don't get me wrong. Although, generally, I dislike surprises in real life, I expect the unforeseeable in screen/TV productions, and I acknowledge that it can be disappointing if a movie's story proves to be entirely predictable. However, the act of demanding *tales of the unexpected* every time, especially as we grow older – and even for younger viewers maturing in this age of torrential stimulus/infodump overload – is largely foolish. The trick is interpretation. Whether it's the influence of our cultural heritage or level of curiosity, or a personal ability to better understand the metaphors still buried in old familiar stories, at least some of the entertainment value demanded from new movies will always depend upon what the individual viewer chooses to find in the material. Movies can be like music. They might grow on you, even if you dislike or hate them to start with. Spoilers? Oh, not that old whine again!

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Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, UK
w: ttapress.com
e: interzone@ttapress.com
f: facebook.com/TTAPress
t: @TTApress

Editor
Andy Cox
e: andy@ttapress.com
Assistant Fiction Editor
Andy Hedgecock
Book Reviews Editor
Jim Steel
e: jim@ttapress.com
Story Proofreader
Peter Tennant
e: whitenoise@ttapress.com
Events
Roy Gray
e: roy@ttapress.com

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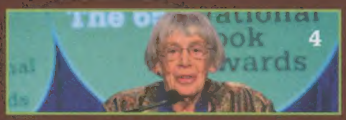
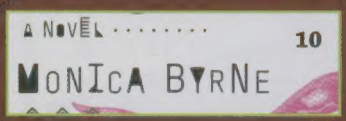
BERENICE by MARTIN HANFORD (2015 COVER ARTIST)
martinhanford1974.deviantart.com

ANN LECKIE
interviewed by Elaine Gallagher





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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

As Others See Us. On PUA (pick-up artist) culture: 'For it is easy to dismiss the men who look to Dapper Laughs for pulling advice, or who pay a shade under $3,000 to attend one of Julien Blanc's "boot camps". They're sci-fi saddos; they're World of Warcraft weirdos.' (Hadley Freeman, *Guardian*) • 'Does anybody use the term "literary fiction" who doesn't have one foot on a spaceship?' (Michael Caines, *Times Literary Supplement*)

Peter Firmin, co-creator with Oliver Postgate of such Smallfilms genre classics as *The Clangers* and *Bagpuss*, received a special lifetime honour at the 2014 BAFTA Children's Awards.

Blurbismo. 'In 1857, Charles Dickens was probably the most famous and beloved Englishman alive – a cross between J.K. Rowling and Princess Diana.' (DVD blurb, *Dickens' Secret Love*)

Stephen King on what still rankles: 'Early in my career, *The Village Voice* did a caricature of me that hurts even today when I think about it. It was a picture of me eating money. I had this big, bloated face. It was this assumption that if fiction was selling a lot of copies, it was bad. If something is accessible to a lot of people, it's got to be dumb because most people are dumb. And that's elitist. I don't buy it.' (*Rolling Stone*)

Scholarly Insight Dept. 'I believe that [Sax] Rohmer's texts aim at effects that differ fundamentally from the effects that high modernist literature aspires to.' (Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu – The Chinese Supervillain and the spread of Yellow Peril ideology*, 2014)

Ursula K. Le Guin's impassioned National Book Awards acceptance speech caused some stir. 'Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom – poets, visionaries – realists of a larger reality.' See/read it all at www.ursulakleguin.com/UKL_info.html.

Science Corner. 'Amateur and professional astrologers alike captivated by "incredible" storms across Uranus.' (*Independent*)

World Fantasy Awards. Novel: Sofia Samatar, *A Stranger in Olondria*. Novella: Andy Duncan & Ellen Klages, 'Wakulla Springs' (Tor.com). Short: Caitlin R. Kiernan, 'The Prayer of Ninety Cats' (*Subterranean*). Anthology: George R.R. Martin & Gardner Dozois, eds., *Dangerous Women*. Artist: Charles Vess. Collection: Caitlin R. Kiernan, *The Ape's Wife and Other Stories*. Special/Professional: (tie) Irene Gallo, art director of Tor.com, and William K. Schafer of Subterranean Press. Special/Non-Professional: *Clarkesworld*.

Christopher Nolan reassured everyone who complained about *Interstellar*'s inaudible dialogue drowned out by loud music and effects: this 'impressionistic' approach was intentional, indeed 'adventurous and creative'. So there. (*Hollywood Reporter*) Another view: 'The film's audio and complexity have both been hotbeds for debate, especially in regard to the scientific soundness of the plot. In the grand scheme of things, however, *Interstellar* is not a science fiction film; it is a film about humanity and the way people live.' (*Liberty Voice*)

Scott Lynch tweeted: 'Holding out hope for Peter Jackson's *Leaf by Niggle*, because I hear Legolas is only in it for about forty-five minutes.'

John Clute was declared a jolly good fellow – that is, an Honorary Visiting Fellow – at Anglia Ruskin University.

Media Awards. Hollywood Film Awards: Animation, *How to Train Your Dragon 2*; Blockbuster, *Guardians of the Galaxy*. • International Emmys: the best drama

series award went to *Utopia*, which in anticipation of this triumph had already been axed by Channel 4.

David Pringle passes on 'a revelation that's contained in my recent interview with Fay Ballard (in *Deep Ends: The J. G. Ballard Anthology 2014* ed. Rick McGrath, Toronto: Terminal Press, 2014). She confirms that her whole family attended the 1969 British Eastercon in Oxford, and also confesses that she and her brother let off stink bombs there. She thinks the stink-bombing was done on the Sunday morning of the con, and that the main programme had to be brought to a temporary halt while the odour dispersed.'

Dysprosium is the 2015 UK Eastercon, with a London Heathrow venue. See dysprosium.org.uk.

Thog's Masterclass. Dept of Punchy Opening Lines. 'At first there was only the cold, the Stygian inky iciness that held every muscle of his body in thrall and made his thoughts flow with the turgid slowness of treacly molasses.' • Nuance Dept. 'This planet was different, but quite similar.' '"Their brain is so much like ours, but different," the doc said.' 'Their blood is kind of like ours, only totally different.' (all Mike Shepherd, *Kris Longknife: Tenacious*, 2014) • Dept of Cognitive Centres. 'Dorothy's eyes were turned inward to her long-buried memories.' 'Thoughts ran thick and furious inside her head, pulsing through her unmoving body, throbbing between her legs.' (both Debra Ginsberg, *The Neighbors Are Watching*, 2010)

R.I.P.

Russell Aitken, who ran Obelisk Books in Glasgow (a shop specialising in sf and crime) from the 1980s to early this century, died on 21 November.

André Carneiro (1922–2014), distinguished and much-anthologised Brazilian sf author whose debut collection was *Diário da nave perdida* (*A Lost Ship's Log*, 1963) and whose latest book appeared in 2013, died on 4 November; he was 92.

Leigh Chapman (1939–2014), US actress/screenwriter who was in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1965–1966) and wrote scripts for *My Favorite Martian* (1966) and *The Wild Wild West* (1966–1968).

Stefan Ghidoveanu, Romanian sf editor, translator, publisher and most famously broadcaster whose long-running nonfiction radio show *Explorers of Tomorrow's World* was followed by the Romanian sf community for 30 years, died at the end of October; he was 59.

Jesus F. Gonzalez (1964–2014), US horror author who as J.F. Gonzalez published over a dozen novels (some collaborative) and four collections, died on 10 November; he was 50.

Michael Hayes (1929–2014), UK producer, director, actor and later newsreader responsible for the classic BBC sf serial *A for Andromeda* (1961) and three *Doctor Who* stories (1978–1979), died on 16 September; he was 85. (*Independent*, whose obituary headline credited him with 'the sci-fi series "The Andromeda Strain"'.)

(John) Hayden Howard (1925–2014), US author of nineteen sf magazine stories 1952–1971 and one novel, *The Eskimo Invasion* (1967), died on 23 October; he was 88.

P.D. James (1920–2014), distinguished UK detective novelist – made a baroness in 1991 – whose one sf venture was *The Children*

of Men (1992, filmed 2006), died on 27 November. She was 94.

Sidney Kramer (1915–2014), US publisher, agent and book dealer who was a founder of Bantam Books and later New American Library, died on 10 December; he would have been 100 in January.

Glen A. Larson (1937–2014), US TV producer whose sf series included *Battlestar Galactica* (1978–1979), *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979–1981), *Knight Rider* (1982–1986), *Manimal* (1983) and *Automan* (1983–1984), died on 14 November; he was 77.

Alan L. Lickiss, US author of some ten short stories since 1996 (five collected as *High Heeled Distraction*, 2010), died on 10 November.

Walter W. Lee Jr (1931–2014), author of the monumental *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films* (three volumes 1972–1974) – an important early study of sf cinema that earned him a special award from the 1975 Worldcon – died on 23 November aged 83. He also wrote the horror-sf novel *Shapes* (1987) with Richard Delap.

John Moat (1936–2014), UK poet and novelist who with John Fairfax founded the Arvon writing workshops, and who contributed to *Fairfax's Frontier of Going: An Anthology of Space Poetry* (1969), died on 11 September; he was 78.

R.A. Montgomery (1936–2014), US author of many genre-themed 'Choose Your Own Adventure' gamebooks and the 1990 *Trio: Rebels in the New World* post-holocaust sf series, died on 9 November aged 78.

Patricia Nurse, whose one sf story was the much-anthologised 'One Rejection Too Many' (July 1978 *Asimov's*), died on 3 March 2014.

Michel Parry (1947–2014), Belgian-born horror/supernatural novelist whose many anthologies included the *Mayflower Books of Black Magic Stories* and the *Reign of Terror* collections of Victorian horror, died on 1 November; he was 67.

Eckhard Schwettmann (1957–2014), German publisher and publicist who from 1996 to 2001 was head of marketing (as E S) and then head of publishing for the Perry Rhodan franchise, died on 4 November aged 57.

George Slusser (1939–2014), US academic critic whose sf studies range from *Robert A. Heinlein* (1976) to *Gregory Benford* (2014), and who also edited/co-edited many critical anthologies, died on 4 November aged 75.

Rocky Wood (1959–2014), New Zealand-born expert on Stephen King whose critical books include *The Complete Guide to the Works of Stephen King* (2003), died on 1 December aged 55.

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during the previous year.

You may vote for and against any number of stories published in issues 250 to 255 inclusive (we publish a list of eligible works here to help remind you).

You don't have to have read every issue in order to cast a vote.

As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think. We'll publish as many comments as we can.

Martin McGrath will be overseeing the poll as usual. Please send him your votes using one of the two methods below.

The results will be published in issue 258, so please make sure your votes and comments are in before March 31st.

VOTE BY EMAIL

interzonepoll@ttapress.com

VOTE ONLINE

ttapress.com/interzone/readerspoll/

VOTE FOR YOUR FAVOURITE STORIES OF 2014

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Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam

Bad Times to be in the Wrong Place
David Tallerman

The Labyrinth of Thorns
C. Allegra Hawksmoor

Beneath the Willow Branches, Beyond the Reach of Time
Caroline M. Yoachim

Predvestniki
Greg Kurzawa

Lilacs and Daffodils
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Wake Up, Phil
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Tom Greene

JONATHAN McCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED

THE ALLURE OF AMBIGUITY

The older I become and the more I read, the more I am drawn to ambiguity. I am bored by stories that tell me what to think and energised by stories that encourage me to reach my own conclusions and create my own interpretations. I am not a passive recipient of story and neither are you.

Most psychologists will tell you that reading is an inherently dynamic process. Rather than sitting quietly and waiting for a story to snap into focus, our brains process the things we read by actively comparing them to what we already know about people, the world and different types of stories. As our eyes scan down the page, our brains draw on these reserves of knowledge to check the validity of our working hypotheses about what the text is trying to say and where it might be headed, almost as though our brains were writing their own alternate versions of the story. This process kicks in regardless of whether you are reading a shopping list or an M. John Harrison novel but you can really feel it happening when you read a clever thriller like Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* as the novel encourages you to believe one set of things about the characters before introducing a pair of well-executed twists that turn everything on its head.

Reading is a skill that continues to improve long after you leave school. It isn't just that your ability to comprehend text improves as your vocabulary expands; it's that the questions you learn to ask of a text become more and more sophisticated the more you read. Every time an author relies upon heavy-handed symbolism to get their point across, you become more sensitive and more likely to spot a subtle use of imagery in another text. Every time you fall for a red herring or fail to spot a plot twist, your brain becomes more alive to misdirection meaning that you are more likely to spot the next Grand Reveal coming a mile off. Psychologists refer to these lines of critical interrogation as schemata and our stocks of schemata grow the more sophisticated our thinking becomes.

Unfortunately, these gifts come with a heavy price as your ability to ask sophisticated questions of a text means that texts are less likely to surprise you, and surprise is one of the most powerful effects that a book can have. The reason they say that the golden age of science fiction is twelve is that twelve-year-olds are sophisticated enough to comprehend most texts and yet naïve enough to be surprised by nearly all of them.

The natural tendency of audiences to grow more sophisticated with the passage of time is a problem inherent to human culture. The form of classical song known as opera has evolved considerably since its inception in the 17th Century and every time instruments changed, orchestras swelled and vocal technique shifted, it was in response to an audience that had grown tired of hearing the same old thing week after week and year after year.

Much like opera, science fiction responded to the growing sophistication of its audience by trying to become more sophisticated in turn. The result was a sort of cognitive arms race whose traces are most evident when you consider the evolution of single tropes: In 1895, the idea of someone travelling into the future was so mind-blowing that H.G. Wells was able to get an entire novel out of it. By 1958, the idea of time travel had grown so stale that Robert Heinlein was moved to write "—All You Zombies—" about a time-traveller who impregnates his own mother only to learn that his mother is in fact a future version of himself who has undergone gender reassignment surgery. The cognitive arms race between reader and writer is visible all across the history of science fiction. In fact, most of the great reformation periods of genre history can be explained by the need to find new ways of reaching an audience: What was the New Wave if not science fiction trying to stay ahead of its readers by incorporating more literary techniques? What is the current drive for greater diversity if not an attempt to replenish the field's dwindling creative energies by drawing on the experiences and cultural heritage of people with different backgrounds? Once a culture hears the drum beat of the New Shiny, it becomes as loud as it is relentless. However, while this type of cognitive arms race is one solution to the problem of growing audience sophistication, it is not the only one.

Back in the 1960s, the world of cinema was forced to contend with a Hollywood machine that was beginning to spend more and more money in an attempt to stay

"M. John Harrison's decision to pull the same trick in a series of science fiction novels has left the genre feeling grubby and self-conscious"

ahead of audiences. Rather than trying to compete with the deep pockets of the Anglosphere, some filmmakers set out to make films that would deal with sophisticated audiences by working with them rather than against them. By encouraging home-grown directors to take risks and reaching out to filmmakers from non-European cinematic traditions, European filmmakers built a network of festivals and magazines devoted to films that gave audiences room to make up their own minds and draw their own conclusions.

Art house film realised that the story an audience experiences is not necessarily the same as the one that was created for them. Instead of seeking to maintain control over the story that existed in the audience's heads, art house film presented audiences with incomplete texts and encouraged them to fill in the gaps for themselves. For example, Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* begins with a young woman going missing on an island only for her friends to rapidly lose interest and wander off. Why? Well…your guess really is as good as mine and therein lies the point. A similar kind of technique is evident in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* as it presents the audience with several radically different versions of the same event. This deliberate ambiguity encourages audiences not only to speculate about what really happened but also to reflect upon why it is that humans feel the need to lie and deceive in the first place. The greatest works of art house films are not those with the most engaging stories or the most impressive ideas, but those that provoke the most thought. Arguably the single greatest science fiction film ever made, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* has as many interpretations as there are people who have seen it, and while none of those interpretations is strictly 'correct' all of them are guaranteed to be beautiful.

Science fiction has never been entirely comfortable with ambiguity. While readers of the fantastic always had classic texts like Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and James' *The Turn of the Screw* encouraging them to forego the joys of cognitive closure, the canon of science fiction took its cues from popular science and preached only clarity and precision. Like many aspects of traditional science fiction, this cultural aversion to ambiguity has been under pressure since at least the New Wave. The first step towards embracing ambiguity was allowing for a form of moral ambiguity. This meant that while authors were still expected to construct their societies with scientific precision, they could leave it up to the readers whether or not they found said societies attractive. This is why Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Samuel R. Delany's *Triton* are respectively subtitled 'An Ambiguous Utopia' and 'An Ambiguous Heterotopia'.

Ambiguity has been one of the great benefits of eroding genre boundaries. M. John Harrison's decision to make the world of Viriconium more and more ambiguous with each passing novel puzzled fantasy readers in the early 1980s but his decision to pull the same trick in a series of science fiction novels has left the genre feeling grubby and self-conscious. How can you go back to reading James Corey's *Expanse* series or John Scalzi's *Old Man's War* novels when the likes of *Light* and *Empty Space* have already taught you how to ask much harder questions? Nina Allan's *The Race* is one of the finest science fiction novels of 2014 precisely because it encourages you to ask difficult questions of the novel, its plot, its characters, and its themes. Great novels don't just give you a single well-crafted story; they give you the space to come up with messy ones of your own.

NINA ALLAN'S TIME PIECES

THE ROAD GOES EVER ONWARDS?

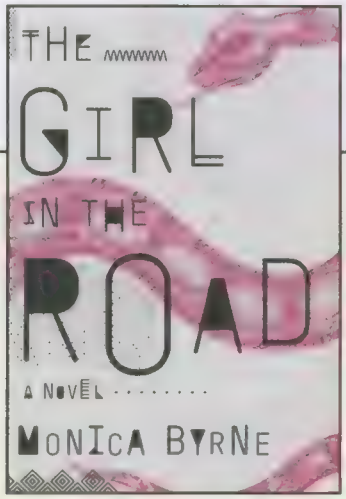
Monica Byrne's debut novel *The Girl in the Road* did not follow an easy path to publication. Rejected many times over a period of several years, Byrne struggled first to find an agent whom she considered properly sympathetic to her project, and then a publisher with sufficient independent-mindedness to risk their dollars. She believed in her work though, and the tough-mindedness necessary to the creation of such an original novel in the first place was surely the determining factor in her eventual success in finding the book a home. *The Girl in the Road* was published in 2014. In it, two women, Meena and Mariama, each embark on a journey to discover the truth about their past and about the personal tragedies that have brought them to where they now are. Their stories take place in a near future, where India has become the dominant superpower and the latest superfuel is metallic hydrogen. Some race, gender and class barriers have been broken down, others remain, morphed into new expressions of an older ignorance. Two interwoven narratives approach each other from opposite sides of the compass, finally intertwining and becoming one. There is a sense of crisis but no overt resolution, which is all to the good. Byrne's imagined future is evoked with a skill and a level of understatement that makes it feel imminent. I read this novel with pleasure and admiration, and look forward to seeing more of Byrne's work in the future. Why then did I finish *The Girl in the Road* pursued by a nagging demon of disappointment? Why, whilst I would certainly recommend this novel to others, would I not feel able to recommend it unreservedly?

The Girl in the Road is beautifully written, not just in the styling of its language, which is rich and textured and musical, but in the way it is structured: oblique enough to remain intriguing right until the end, whilst forging a story-path that is clear enough to make it compelling, even page-turning. Moreover, there's not an infodump in sight. Byrne handles the science fictional conceits – an evolved political power structure, new forms of energy, innovations in technology and social behaviours – in a drip-feed of seamless in-cluing that makes her seem like an old hand. It is precisely because Byrne handles her science fiction with such natural aplomb that I felt cheated when it became clear to me that the futuristic background to the story was nothing more than that – background. That the science fiction had been employed as stage dressing, rather than as core content. The story could have taken place anywhere, at any time – the metallic hydrogen, the political unrest, the fracturing of near-future empires were essentially redundant.

One of the arguments most commonly used to fuel the so-called genre wars is that mainstream 'incomers' fail at science fiction because they are ignorant of the work that has already been done in the genre and so cluelessly persist in reinventing the wheel. Personally, I tend towards the belief that the reinventing the wheel thing is a symptom rather than the cause, and that the difference between a true science fiction novel and a novel that merely makes use of science fictional tropes is one of approach. Is the science fiction integral to the plot? How well does it serve the story? Does the science fiction *matter*, in other words – or is it just there to provide the futuristic equivalent of local colour?

For an example of what we're talking about here, we might compare the story at the heart of *The Girl in the Road* with the core narrative of George Orwell's *1984*. Both stories are love stories in which the protagonists' lives are shattered by an insurmountable act of betrayal. Both stories include terrible violence. Both are set in an imagined future. At a surface level, it would appear that *1984* and *The Girl in the Road* have much in common. The crucial difference is that the love story between Winston and Julia in *1984* is not only fundamental to the plot but equally integrated into the science fictional premise of that story. Winston's personal dilemma speaks in microcosm of what the novel as a whole is trying to say – the SF matters, absolutely, and that is why *1984* is a classic of science fiction.

In *The Girl in the Road*, the tragedy of 'what happens' stands apart from its setting in a way that makes the science fiction – the near future ambience, the actions of an Indian hegemony towards a colonised Africa – purely incidental. The science fictional element that most clearly links the twinned narratives of Meena and Mariama – the smuggling of metallic hydrogen and its later utilisation in the



"As a piece of writing, The Girl in the Road impressed me very much"

construction of the trans-ocean wave-energy generator known as the Trail – never adds up to anything more than a physical manifestation of time passing. As I progressed further into the novel and could begin to make guesses about where it was headed, I continued to admire the way the author had managed to bring her story threads together, but found the disconnect between the story and the science fiction profoundly unsatisfying.

There will be those who argue that Byrne's naturalistic deployment of science fiction is an advancement of the genre. Mainstream novels set in the present day routinely employ political or social context as a backdrop rather than a core theme – why shouldn't future or alternate history settings be used in a similar way? And yet a novel is not chance, but choice, a series of decisions on the part of the writer that should ideally mean something. Our known surroundings can easily become invisible to us by virtue of familiarity – a writer must make a conscious decision as to which aspects of that idiom to highlight, which are worthy of our attention, and for what reason. When you choose to write science fiction, you choose to attract the reader's attention from the outset and not always in a good way. When faced with the unfamiliar, the reader's first instinct is to ask why: why is this story taking place on another planet, in the future, in an alternate reality? Why didn't they just set it down the road from where they live?

Does the science fiction matter, and if it doesn't, why is it there? If the reader feels bound to ask this question, then so should the writer. As a narrative choice, science fiction is radical and by its nature not as immediately accessible as mimesis. If such a choice is made without strong narrative justification, the science fiction will always run the risk of seeming lightweight, an unnecessary gimmick, designed perhaps to cover plot holes, or to make a conventional story more interesting. As writers, we need to ask ourselves if that is what we intended.

There is a stark divide between science fiction and 'science fiction flavour', between writing science fiction and utilising its elements. As a piece of writing, *The Girl in the Road* impressed me very much. As a work of science fiction, it promised a great deal but wound up being negligible. In a recent essay for the online magazine *Strange Horizons*, the critic Martin Lewis argued that the increasing seepage (or pillage, depending on your standpoint) of science fictional ideas into the mainstream can only be a good thing for everyone concerned, leading not to a dilution of science fiction but to a 'levelling up': the promotion of literary values within genre and a broadening of viewpoint and subject matter within the literary mainstream. "My hope is that the non-genre boom simply becomes the start of a new wave of science fiction without boundaries," says Lewis, "and that the next time the broadsheets come calling we have some better broadsides."

My heart says bring it on, but my head says never gonna happen. Many of the mainstream writers cited by Lewis – not to mention their publishers – seem at pains to distance themselves from the science fiction label, often citing SF as a childhood enthusiasm rather than an ongoing preoccupation. In a recent piece for *The Independent*, the writer Nick Harkaway, who just two years ago won the Kitschies Red Tentacle Award for his novel *Angelmaker*, expressed his delight, nay relief at finding his most recent novel, *Tigerman*, listed in the 'fiction' rather than the 'science fiction' category of the annual Goodreads Readers' Choice awards: "Science fiction is what I read as a kid, and it is a literature that challenges the real, which is what I like to do. But even now, with the fantastical waterfalling into the mainstream of writing and the world we inhabit more science fictionish than it has ever been, the label still closes doors."

It's all a bit Lib Dem, isn't it? And we all know how that ended up. Science fiction is not a closed shop – entry is free and is open to anyone – but writers who want to make a lasting contribution would do better to approach with passion rather than caution. And if you're running around scared of the mainstream, you're better off staying there.

WAYNE HAAG: 2014 COVER ARTIST

STEVEN J. DINES interviews Wayne Haag about his work as a concept artist and matte painter for TV and film

According to your bio you started your professional art career in 1996, matte painting on Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element*. How did you come to be involved in that film and indeed the film industry as a whole?
I fell in love with the wide matte painted scenes in *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and other SF movies in the 70s and 80s. These paintings, in acrylics or oils on glass, established the world and all of its possibilities in one single large painting or frame. This was everything I loved about SF book cover art but in a format I preferred: cinemascope!

I figured out how to composite photographic elements together in a darkroom before Photoshop came out, so the digital stuff was easy to grasp. I created a portfolio of SF images in the final year of my photography degree, all recorded to 35mm slide film, which I took to Siggraph, a large computer graphics conference in the US in '95, and from that scored a job with Digital Domain. Ten months later the work visa came through and I went to live in LA for a year.

The delay in getting the visa was fortuitous as they were gearing up for *The Fifth Element* and needed matte painters. Right place, right time as they say! I was good at photo-compositing images which got me the work, but it was here I learnt the basics of painting. I stayed to work on *Red Corner* and then returned to Australia.

Were you able to visit any sets on these film projects?
The main shooting set for *The Fifth Element* was in the UK, but working at Digital Domain I did get to see the shooting of the miniature sets and models, same on *The Lord of the Rings*, and I did actually get to supervise some aspects of the VFX on *Farscape*.

The SF television series *Farscape* ran from 1999 to 2003. Were you involved from the outset, and how did you find the experience?
Yes, we started with Season 1, Episode 1. I painted mattes for just over half of the episodes, the other half being painted by the VFX Supervisor. *Farscape* was a lot of fun and a lot more creatively free than most productions. I did my best not to have the same matte shot used repeatedly within an episode like they used to do on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or *Deep Space Nine*. We tried our best to provide different matte paintings each time one was required. I think we succeeded, too.

How does working in television compare to film?
It's usually faster, a quicker turnaround. Back then, before high-def, you could get away with murder as the screen resolution was so low. It was all 2D as well, which meant that projecting paintings onto 3D was only just being talked about, although we did one at the very end of season 1 of *Farscape*. Now every matte painting I do is projected onto 3D in some form and animated.

TV commercials usually pay better and they just want you to make it look good any way you can, whereas film is slower, or used to be; they like it done by the numbers and there's a committee, 3D departments and compositing departments, and pipelines…

More recently, you have become involved in film concept art. Can you tell us a little more about that? For example, some of the films you have worked on and the extent of your involvement in the whole pre-production process?
Matte painting within the visual effects or post-production areas has become overly technical. Matte departments are mostly 3D now and a full environment takes several people to pull off. Gone are the days of a single artist painting a sweeping scene of ancient Rome or Romulus! I love 3D, just not enough to use it all the time to the level required for modern VFX work.

Concept art for pre-production on the other hand can be created almost any way you like as long as it communicates the idea. It's also the most creative part of the film making process as you are having to provide ideas, not just images.

The Wolverine was a fantastic job in that I worked with a great Production Designer and Art Director who were easygoing, supportive of ideas, and respected our involvement (which isn't always the case). Concept art becomes the basis for so many of the departments, such as prop design, set design, construction, etc. I was asked to repaint a funeral pagoda

Sky Burial #3, oil painting, a cropped portion of which appeared on the cover of issue #255 (Nov–Dec 2014)

Rendezvous, oil painting, a cropped portion of which appeared on the cover of issue #254 (Sep–Oct 2014)

several times because the size I originally painted would have been too expensive to build. As they say, with creative freedom comes financial responsibility! For this film I worked in-house at Fox Studios in Sydney but I have since worked on several productions from home.

You worked on the Angelina Jolie directed film *Unbroken*, based on the incredible book by Laura Hillenbrand. Can you tell us more about your involvement in that project?
Unbroken was a case of working from home, and I managed to create one painting before being asked to finish up…for being too slow! This is where changes created beyond one's control mysteriously become your fault. I created several versions of a Japanese POW camp based on revised building layouts. These revisions were decisions made way above my pay grade as they say, yet I copped the flack.

A different experience from working on *The Wolverine* then?
Yes, *The Wolverine* was the total opposite. The top guys took responsibility for changes and never pushed that onto the concept guys. It's part of the process in pre-production that things will change, it's a given, everybody knows that and so *The Wolverine* was relaxing and fun because it was accepted.

A great example of a change in concept art was the scene at a capsule hotel that is quite famous in Tokyo, but was set in Osaka in the film. For some reason they couldn't shoot in Tokyo which we found out about after I had already finished this painting depicting the hotel at night. So I had to create a new version based on a Sydney location. Turned out great.

I even initiated a change that stopped the set builders in their tracks right when they were almost done working on the

The Fifth Element, matte painting, © Gaumont

Yashida Estate set. It didn't actually cost anything extra but the fact that our ideas were genuinely respected was great. *The Wolverine* is my second favourite film project behind *The Fifth Element*.

How much research do you carry out before or during a film project?
On films like *The Wolverine*, *Gods of Egypt* or *The Maze Runner* I collect loads of research and reference material. Mostly visual reference with some historical or functional research, if needed. I have gigs of images of all sorts of subject matter because you never know what you'll be asked to come up with next. A lot of art departments will have an extensive library of paper books too.

I cannot leave the film world behind without asking about *The Lord of the Rings*, my favourite novels throughout my teenage years. What was it like to work on one of the most successful film franchises of all time? Did it feel like you were a small cog in a very large machine or was it more like your involvement in *The Wolverine*?
The matte departments are usually small tight-knit groups even in big film productions, or they used to be, not sure about now, but back then there were three of us, then three became four, then five, then a temporary sixth matte painter for a bit. So we were small cogs in a big machine but it felt a lot more intimate and for the most part relaxed because we were separated from the hordes downstairs.

Each of us had our shots and we painted our particular shot until finished, mostly left alone to quietly paint Middle Earth. That part is the best: you can immerse yourself in that world and just enjoy the process.

We liaised with the compositing department and 3D if needed but for the most part we were left alone as no one else knew how to do what we did. Matte painting is/was the last real artistic creative role in film visual effects that relies on painting skill.

It was once remarked that if the compositing department could write a plug-in called 'make matte painting', they would have and sacked the lot of us! The matte department at ILM wasn't called the Rebel Unit for nothing!

The Visual Effects Supervisor on *The Lord of the Rings*, Mark Stetson, was the same supervisor on *The Fifth Element*. He liked the work I did there and asked me to join the team at Weta Digital. Soon after I got there he was fired by Peter Jackson, which I wasn't happy about. Turns out Peter thought he knew more about VFX than Mark. Mark was the lead model maker on *Blade Runner*, by the way! His first film was *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* so he was no slouch.

Peter Jackson also had a problem with 'matte paintings' and wanted them all to be 100% photo-composites, no painting, which we promptly ignored.

By the end of *The Two Towers* I was becoming a glorified texture painter for the 3D department and decided to leave. It was around that time that I started to think about getting into oil painting. I moved back to Australia soon after leaving Weta.

We've come to the reason for this interview: *Interzone*. How did you come to land the role of cover artist for 2014?
This is part of a bigger question which relates to my desire to paint large-scale SF oil paintings and move away from the film industry altogether. Despite how cool a lot of SF films look today, they are ultimately someone else's story, someone else's project. It's cool for five minutes, you get a good pay cheque, see your name in the

The Wolverine, concept art, © 20th Century Fox

credits, and that's it. But it's not my property.

My original inspiration was book cover art, even before *Star Wars*. Ninety percent of the SF art I love was painted by UK artists: Jim Burns, Chris Moore, Tim White, Peter Elson, Chris Foss et al. I still have the *Terran Trade Authority* book that I…ahem… rescued from the school library because other kids were drawing in or cutting out pictures from similar books. I felt *Spacecraft 2000–2100 AD* needed protecting before they got to it. I still have it today. It blew my mind the way small stories were made up for these completely disparate images and woven into an overall timeline. It gave you a taste and your imagination took over. I still love it.

I decided to get back to or rather start doing what I really loved, to stop skirting around the edges and just bloody dive into the art I wanted to create. Enough of the committees, just paint the stuff that has been burning away in me since I was a kid. I began doing so around 2005.

Part of achieving this in the pragmatic sense was getting my name out there to a wider audience who love this sort of work, so I contacted several magazines and submitted my interest to paint covers and/or interiors. I may have been somewhat well known in film circles but I am a total stranger to the SF art world. *Interzone* has helped get my work out there, starting with interiors, yours in particular Steven ['The Machinehouse Worker's Song' in issue #246 was Wayne's first illustration for the magazine], and then Andy asked me at the end of 2013 if I'd be interested in doing the covers for 2014.

That I came in right behind Jim Burns was fantastic! To have contributed to an English magazine of such standing and quality is quite an honour for me considering most of my inspiration came from British artists to begin with.

It's a way for me to say thanks to all you guys.

Your *Interzone* covers are glimpses or snapshots of larger artworks you have created. Of the six covers, which is your favourite, and why?

It's true, with the exception of #250, and even that could be included in that series, they are all a look into my major project.

I'd say #250 is my favourite. It was a landmark issue in *Interzone*'s history and the sole spaceman represents all that's out there, unknown, beyond imagining.

I was hoping to have a coherent set of images to paint for the year, specific to *Interzone*, but other work intruded which left me with using the covers as opportunities to kill two birds. One, satisfy the cover requirements, and two, use them as studies for larger works I was creating for the Illuxcon show in the US in September. Issues #254 and #255 are cropped portions of my larger works as unfortunately I had no time to paint dedicated covers.

You have supplied a lot of interior artwork for *Interzone* over the past couple of years, in a range of styles and mediums – oil, ink, digital. Do you have a preference or does each project dictate your approach?

The different styles and/or media have somewhat come down to the need for the images to read well on the interior paper stock. If the images get too subtle, the ink can't handle the differences and it blocks up, particularly in the darker areas. I love Martin Hanford's style, which apart from being awesome works well for the interiors because of his simple colour choices. And so I started thinking about simplifying my

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, matte painting, © New Line Cinema

images as well. Warwick Fraser-Coombe's art (also awesome) has a similar style that works well on this paper.

Film work dictates digital, no way around that, but book covers can be almost anything, and I've used *Interzone* to play with different styles. I would love to be able to ink like Sergi Toppi or illustrate like Moebius, and I will try these techniques out, but I suppose my love has always been oil paintings.

It strikes me as unusual (and admirable) that an artist working primarily in the field of science fiction would prefer such a traditional way of painting. Which prompts the question: do you often venture outside SF in your work?
The traditional painting movement has been steadily growing again these last several years, I think people are tired of the sterile feel of the digital composite look. For the artists it is a wonderful tactile and organic medium. The feel of paint on canvas, the smells, the texture, etc, it's wonderful.

The fact that you can sell the original artwork also plays a part beyond the original commission and any other usage rights sales. Having a real painting to hang on your wall is something special; a digital print just cannot compete.

I go out and paint landscape en plein air occasionally, but not nearly often enough. Landscape is very much a part of my SF and film work so naturally I want to paint it. I just need to get outdoors more!

By the way, Chris Moore showed a wonderful landscape painting at Illuxcon this year. I would have bought it if I'd had the money. It was a beautiful late afternoon winter scene near his country home.

Returning to *Interzone*, which story did you find the easiest to produce the artwork for, and which the most difficult?
The most difficult story was 'The Pursuit of the Whole is Called Love' by L.S. Johnson. I'm not sure I even came close for that one. Way out of my usual territory. In the end I interpreted the story as some sort of fractured psyche. I only got that from looking into a mirror in my bathroom that has various panels breaking up the reflection.

The easiest would have been 'Ad Astra' by Carole Johnstone. The image just popped into my head fully formed. And if you're reading this, Carole, I haven't forgotten your print – sorry, I'll get it to you, I promise!

'Filaments' by Lavie Tidhar would have been a close follow-up. That popped into my head pretty quickly too.

All the stories have all been great fun to illustrate, and I loved reading them all.

How much science fiction do you read, and can you tell us some of your favourite authors in the genre?
I read as much as I can or have time for. My first ever SF book was *The Zero Stone* by Andre Norton. I recently finished Alistair Reynolds' *Blue Remembered Earth* and his short-story collection *Galactic North*. I've also just read the latest in the *Expanse* series by James S.A. Corey. *The Sentients of Orion* series by Marianne de Pierres was fantastic, too. Anything by Iain M. Banks. Then there is David Brin, Peter F. Hamilton, Gary Gibson… The list goes on and on, and that's without touching on all of the graphic novels in the genre!

I've found that creative people tend to fall into two camps – they're either fastidious planners or they fly by the seat of their pants. Which are you?
Mostly a planner but I can toss

The Maze Runner, concept art, © 20th Century Fox

that out the airlock if a new idea strikes…and then I need to plan around that new idea!

What and/or who are your greatest influences, artistic or otherwise?
Another long list question. My influences include film, French graphic novels and comics, SF novels, manga and anime, old traditional matte painters, almost every English SF artist, photojournalism, current events, history… In short, I'm curious about a lot of stuff!

You're currently blogging about your experience of Illuxcon 2014 on your website, particularly the financial outlay of participating. How important is it for an artist to 'get out there' and exhibit their work, and was Illuxcon as productive and rewarding as you had hoped?
You mean I'm currently behind in blogging about Illuxcon!

I imagine it's the same for writers, we have to kick the bushes every now and again and meet people who are attracted to that work. Conventions are big in the US and to some degree in the UK but almost nonexistent here in Australia. So, I am forced to up sticks and show the work in the US. Artwork on the internet is one thing, seeing a 66" x 26' oil painting in the flesh is another!

I first heard of Illuxcon in 2008 as the place to show traditionally painted SF/F artwork. It was set up for collectors to get access to all of the artists in one place and not have to track them down across the globe. Bring all the artists into one gallery space over five days and show your work, meet people, and get your work on their radar. Which I did. Financially, it was a loss, but I am looking at the long-term and further exposure. I actually signed up to Facebook at the prompting of Jim Burns, Mark Harrison, and Chris Moore, something I swore I would never do! But it comes back to keeping at the forefront of people's minds and not fading away into the background.

Illuxcon was awesome because I got to meet two of my SF art heroes, Jim Burns and Chris Moore. I was fortunate to have discovered Mark Harrison's work and became mates with him as well. I also met some incredible US artists. It is a fantastic community of supportive and passionate people who love the genre. The collectors are probably even more passionate and totally dig what we paint!

So what lies beyond 2014 for Wayne Haag? Any projects you can share with us that might interest *Interzone* readers?
I've been working on a series of oil paintings that are set in a world of shipbreaking, albeit spaceships not sea-going vessels. I have an idea for a large format book that is novella length or made up of short stories set in that world. I have no idea what the stories would be or who would write them. The paintings will continue to come out regardless and perhaps they will begin to inform the story. The paintings would describe one aspect of that world and the writing another, though not necessarily the exact same aspects.

I have also had preliminary talks with a UK publisher interested in putting out a monograph of my work to date, so that should be fun as well. Fingers crossed.

In the meantime, I have a few book covers to illustrate and the odd film job still pops up from time to time. And, as always, I will continue to help Andy with interior illustrations for future issues of *Interzone*…

For more film images and a portfolio please visit Wayne's website: ankaris.com

NOSTALGIA

BONNIE JO STUFFLEBEAM

TORI TAKES ANOTHER HIT OF NOSTALGIA: THE SMOKE is creamy mint cookie down her throat, smooth and hot. It fills her lungs, tickles, burns, and as she coughs it out she laughs, smoke pouring from her lips. Fog fills her head. The live oaks' winter skeletons crisp into focus as the drug takes hold. Tori feels the cold on her skin as if she is a little girl in the snow, her hand in her father's glove, surrounded by his smell of smoke and vodka. Her mother hates the cold but watches from the window. Tori's belly is full. It hasn't been this full for years, not since home, that word a lighthouse beacon she will never again reach without this burn of throat, cloud of mind, her parents having pushed her out once they met her first girlfriend. Tori passes the pipe to her companion.

"I haven't done nostalgia in years," Kay says. "Since I was in college. Homesick."

"No pressure," Tori says. "Just offering."

Her new friend confuses her; she's never been with a slate before, and even though Kay is pre-op, it's taken some concentration not to mix up the pronouns. *Shu*. Tori practices on nights that Kay does not sleep over. *Shur*. Still, she's messed up a couple of times, accidentally said *she* instead of *shu*, *her* instead of *shur*. Kay does not seem to mind these slip-ups, and it is because of this easy-goingness that Tori has let Kay into her head nearly as much as nostalgia.

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

Kay flicks the lighter over the blue-black herb but does not inhale. Instead shu watches the leaves char in the pipe's bowl.

"Hey, knock it off." Tori grabs the pipe, the lighter. "Don't waste it."

"Sorry." Kay shrugs shur thick shoulders; the grey scarf around shur neck shifts in the breeze. Tori itches to bat the decorative balls which hang from it but doesn't.

Instead she remembers. When she was a little girl, she had an orange cat who batted at her scarves. Another cat in college, living with that first girlfriend, Meredith. Meredith's skin against her own, protection from the cold, a laugh like medicine she didn't know she needed.

"You okay?" Kay asks, squeezing the nub of her shoulder. Tori opens her eyes. She had closed them without realizing. This is sad to her, like the day Meredith moved up north.

"Fine," she says. "Cold is all."

Later, atop the flannel red-and-white holiday sheets, Tori closes her eyes again and imagines familiar fingers, longer and thinner than Kay's, inside her, lets the nostalgia hum within like a tongue, lets herself dissolve into the memory of love. One day, she thinks, kissing the nape of Kay's bare neck, shu will feel like memory, shur blank, nippleless chest a comfort of familiarity rather than this stiff newness, this gloss. Tori wants it dull like a pencil worn to the nub.

When they are finished, breathless in one another's embrace, Tori burrows her face in the hair of Kay's armpits, the smell of animal musk and orgasm. As the nostalgia wears off, a veil lifts on this moment, the past fogging instead like a breathed-upon window. Kay's skin is real under her ear, the drum of shur heartbeat a surge through her. It makes her own heart beat faster, her palms sweat. She swallows her spit. To quiet the silence, she pulls her face from the sweat of Kay's body and examines shur in the room's dark.

"Your photographs," she says, "they're good."

Kay laughs. "I know. Is that the only reason you're with me?"

Tori lets her head fall back into place. She knows that Kay is not comfortable enough yet to push, and the question is difficult to answer. Yes, she should say, the photographs. But this would be too much. It would stress her throat, already sore from the smoke. Behind her eyes she recalls them, the photographs, dancers leaping from frame to frame like in a flip-book.

Tori had glimpsed Kay every day at the college as Kay walked past Tori mopping the same spot again and again, trying to look busy so that she would not have to catch Kay's eye. Because she knew who Kay was, had seen shur picture in the school paper, had heard shur name repeated back when Tori was a student, back before her only affiliations with the school were the mop and broom they issued her, the paycheck they sent her monthly for cleaning the classrooms and bathrooms of the art buildings.

Whenever Tori had a moment, she stopped to stare at Kay's photographs. Once she dared to touch them; she wanted to see if the dancer was real, some little person imprisoned in the film, forced to tango and ballet and flamenco hour after hour, day after day, year after year, but it was just paper under Tori's finger, glossy as what would be Tori and Kay's future bedroom shenanigans. The dancers were always slates, or disguised as slates. Tori couldn't believe there could be so many of them in Riddle, Texas, their small college town. And the way they changed from photo to photo, like devils. Like angels. Like monsters. Like memories Tori struggled to remember without the help of smoke down her throat.

"Do you want to learn how to take them?" Kay asks. "I can teach you. I think you'd be good at it."

The idea sends a shiver down Tori's spine; it both intrigues and terrifies her. Too new.

"I can't," she says.

TORI IS AT the sink filling a glass with water when Meredith knocks at the kitchen door.

"Whose car is that outside?" Meredith asks as she pushes past Tori. "You better not dance for her, whoever she is." In the time since she has been away, she's shaved the sides of her head so that the middle patch of hair falls over two bald spots. "If you dance for her, I swear."

It isn't a surprise to see Meredith there, but also it *is* a surprise, as each time she shows up it sends a shock down Tori's belly to her groin. A Pavlov's bell. Tori leaves the faucet on, lets the water run over the sides of the glass and down the drain.

"I don't dance," Tori says, leaning against the sink, digging her hands into the pockets of her pajama pants.

"Bullshit you don't dance," Meredith says. "We used to dance all the time."

"Not anymore. I only danced with you."

Meredith's smile dimples her cheeks. She looks stronger, thicker; from her letters, Tori knows that she's been climbing rocks, running races, cycling across mountains until her muscles quiver. "Prove it," she says.

Even though Kay is in the other room, asleep with shur head on Tori's pillow, Tori's belly aches for a kiss she knows the taste of. Berries and salt. If she could bury her head in Meredith's hair, she would smell the slick oil sweet. She knows this. She knows, too, the way Meredith will move against her in a dance of sweat, the way Meredith will not let Tori touch her. The way she will, once Tori is gasping in her arms, jump up and disappear to the bathroom, how she will emerge flushed and breathless. How she will say, "I took care of it myself." And how Tori will accept this. She knows, too, that as they sit on the couch with their legs intertwined, Meredith will not ask about Kay.

Sure enough, it happens like that. Meredith is out the door twenty minutes later. When Tori crawls back into bed, Kay rolls over and kisses the top of her forehead.

"I don't care, you know, about her," Kay says. "I think you'll find I'm pretty open-minded."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tori closes her eyes and counts the hours until she can light up again.

WHEN SHE RUNS out of nostalgia, she calls up her high school friend, Logan. He and her other friends from that time have never left the small town where they all grew up together, Agape, where they spent weekends downing stolen vodka and imbibing a rainbow assortment of drugs until nostalgia became their drug of choice.

One hour's drive south and Tori is knocking on Logan's door. Logan answers, his skintight jeans smeared with forgotten food particles. His eyes are red as emergency exit letters. When he wraps his arms around her, she feels as though this moment has already occurred. Déjà vu. But of course it's happened before, at least once every two weeks for the last six years of her life.

"You have some?" she asks.

Logan leads her by the hand back to his room, where four old friends and one man Tori has never seen sit around a hookah. Inside his parents' house everything is the same: the same black curtains drawn across every window, the same stuffed moose head mounted above the neglected fireplace, the same smell of stale smoke and semen-filled napkins left too long in Logan's wastebasket. The coal atop the hookah smolders redder than their eyes. As Tori's eyes adjust, her chest constricts; it's a scene straight from senior year when she didn't yet know who she was, when she hadn't yet grown into her own skin, was still shy and ashamed of herself, awkward in her body. This is a thought she struggles to swallow every time she comes here. Instead she takes the pipe they pass her and sucks in the rancid smoke.

Once her eyes match theirs, she feels right again. She looks from face to face in the circle. Back in the day, they used to sneak into the woods to smoke this stuff. They would break into a rundown shed and sit on a ratty couch that smelled of mildew. They nearly got caught by the cops a couple of times, but they were young. Maybe that is the difference, Tori thinks, I know now that I can crumble like charred nostalgia. There was another one of them back then, a boy Tori thought for a while that she loved. They let Daniel be their leader, clung to his every word. She let him be her first boy. The only mistake she ever admitted to.

She recalls his lips on her neck, his fingers tracing the necklace he slipped around her neck like a collar. *This is not the way*, he said, *this is not the way to love you*. Even though his raving words made no sense, she believed them.

Later she realized he wasn't right in the head. He smoked too much. Took other drugs. Shot some into his veins. Back then, especially, it had been nothing more than cigarettes and booze pilfered from the bottom shelves of their parents' vice cabinets for the rest of them. They left Daniel to his own.

"Are you staying for a while?" Annie asks.

"I don't think so," Tori says, taking another hit. This one tastes like day-old salad in her throat. A bad hit. She pulls her water bottle from her purse and tries to swallow the taste. "I have to get back."

"It's okay," Logan says. "Big college grad, we know you're not like us anymore."

Nothing could be closer and farther from the truth.

AT HOME TORI arranges the baggie of nostalgia in a cedar box where she also keeps papers and a glass pipe with a rainbow flower blown onto it. She calls Kay and asks shur to come over. When shu arrives, shu has brought along a digital camera which shu hands to Tori like a holy relic. The camera is red and feels heavy in Tori's palm.

"It's neat," Tori says, thrusting it back at Kay. "Is it new?"

Kay won't take it back. Instead shu stands by Tori's side and shows her how to turn it on.

"It's for you," shu says. Shu arranges Tori's fingers over the buttons, uses Tori's hand like a puppet to take a photograph of the window in Tori's living room. "You have an eye for this," shu says. "Don't waste it."

"I can't take this," Tori says. It feels hard and slick and smells of new plastic. She hates the smell. She tries again to give it back, and when Kay won't take it, her fingers go limp. The camera falls to the carpet with a thud.

Kay leaves it where it has fallen. Takes Tori's hands in shur own and kisses the knuckles. "It's okay," shu says. "You don't have to." Lets shur lips graze the hairs on Tori's arms, kisses the mole on her neck, kisses her eyebrows. Unbuttons her. Tori can tell shu wants to disrobe all of her, peel off her skin even, see inside her body like an X-ray. But Tori won't let shur.

Kay's body will change after shur operation. Tori isn't sure that she will be okay with this. Thinking of Kay's body as something she will have to get used to twice leaves a heavy food feeling in her stomach. Although she's familiar with the way a typical slate body looks post-op – she took a class on gender and sexuality at the university – she wishes she could have met shu once she was already complete, once shu had already grown into the new skin, the smooth Barbie V between shur legs. At least, Tori thinks as she runs her hands over the flat chest she has made a fascination, Kay got this part out of the way before we met.

"I won't know what to do with you," Tori whispers, "after the operation."

Kay's voice, usually calm, is hard-edged when shu responds. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Tori isn't one hundred percent sure. She laughs at herself. When is she ever?

"I just wish, you know, that we'd met once you were complete." She thinks it might help if she explains, but she can't seem to spit the words out. Not without time. She wishes she could freeze the moment and collect herself, but the world doesn't grant wishes that way.

"Complete?" Kay pushes Tori off shur chest. "I'm just as *complete* now as I'll ever be. I'll be more comfortable in my skin, sure, but I'm not incomplete. And besides," shu says, "you're one to talk. What are you doing with your life? You think your reason for living is so you can clean other people's messes?" Shu stops, though Tori can tell shu wants to go on. Then shu looks away. "I'm sorry," shu says. Shu doesn't wait for Tori to say anything, and Tori isn't sure she would say anything given the chance.

Once Kay has gone, Tori loads a bowl, tripping over the camera on her way back to bed. She kicks it underneath the couch like the soccer ball she and her father used to pass back and forth out in the cool green grass, tinged with dew, until the chill on her bare feet became too much and her father would carry her inside and lower her onto the dry carpet. It's a memory empty of the sound of ice clinking in a glass, empty of the alcohol smell. She scrunches her toes against the carpet, a dirty shag she hasn't vacuumed in at least a month. It doesn't feel the same. If the world granted wishes, she would wish that it would feel the same.

THE BONFIRE IN Tori's yard is already blazing when Meredith skids into Tori's gravel drive on her Harley. It has been three days since Tori's fight with Kay, and she is surprised to see Meredith so soon after the last visit. It's surprising not to have to reacquaint herself; it's nice. The fire's warmth makes her bare legs burn.

"Long time no see," Tori says.

"I missed you," Meredith says.

Tori has known Meredith long enough to decipher this code. What she means to say is, she couldn't stand the thought of Tori with someone else. And so she has returned. Tori takes another hit in the hopes that she can convince herself that this time will be forever. They sit by the fire.

"Can't believe you still do this shit," Meredith says, lighting the bowl.

"And you don't?"

Meredith laughs. "I didn't say that. Just, you were always so smart, Tori. Smarter than any of us. I figured you'd grow up faster."

Tori doesn't want to think about it. She blows smoke from her nose. The burn makes her body tremble the way fingers will, later, when the two of them are once more wrapped in Tori's sheets. Tori recalls that first time, when Meredith pushed her onto her own bed. Took control of Tori's room without asking. Tori loved that she didn't ask. She felt in capable hands. They made love to B.B. King on repeat. When they woke in the morning, the air was too hot for such closeness, but they clung to each other anyway. They turned off the music and let the noise of their breath soothe them back into fevered half-sleep.

"Where's the old gang?" Meredith dumps the cashed bowl into the fire. "Call them up."

Once Meredith left, there was nothing more to hold their group of college friends together, though during the five years of undergrad they spent every weekend together. Meredith had been glue, and none of them had ever noticed, not even Tori, who had felt her sticky sweat-soaked skin. But Tori still has their numbers.

An hour later, three chairs around the bonfire have filled with the warm bodies Tori used to cling to, sloppy with drink and smoke, as they stumbled home from evenings of smoke circles and study sessions, one-night stands and late-night movie marathons. When Daniel wouldn't stop calling, even two years after the breakup, it was these friends who, never having known him, demanded he leave her alone. Only two of their old gang are able to make it; the rest, like Meredith, moved away from Riddle after graduation. Still, looking from face to face around the fire is like looking four years into the past, and Tori's body hums, static building under skin. She wants nothing more than to run through the field surrounding her house, to float kites as Meredith scribbles poetry in her little black notebook. Always Tori used to wonder if Meredith was writing about her. Then she knew she never was; instead she wrote of the foreign places she disappeared to more and more those days. A fantastic life she hadn't asked Tori to be part of.

Once the beer has been drained and the empty bottles tossed into the fire in hopes that they will burst, once they have finished off the last of the nostalgia, leaving only ash and a charred roach to burn, they sit back in their chairs and dream of running, though in reality none of them could summon the energy. The hum takes Tori over like an orgasm that never stops. She feels as if, for the first time since graduation, since she lost her place in this college town, she is home.

The hum intensifies. It vibrates her legs and creeps up into the space between her legs. For a moment she remembers Kay. Then forgets. Then it is Meredith again, Meredith's dimpled smile, her soft thighs. Music that she recognizes.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" Meredith slurs, clapping her hand over Tori's pants pocket, where Tori's phone has been ringing.

The phone feels strange in her sweaty palm, like an object that was never meant to be in this world. The caller ID tells her before she picks up that Logan's will be the voice on the other end of the line.

"I'm sorry," Logan says when she picks up. "I had to tell you. Daniel killed himself two weeks ago."

A wave of numb travels from her ear to her feet. Her stomach flops as if she has swallowed sour milk. She can feel Daniel all of a sudden. His hands like a bandage across her wrist, pulling her onto his bed while his parents were away. Refusing to let go of her hand in the night. Saying, *if something ever happened to you. If anyone ever hurt you.* And she knew, back then, that he was damaged. Had seen his own stepfather's dead body hanging from the ceiling. Had heard the fights from the other side of thin walls for all his childhood. She thought he was strong, thought he had grown from these experiences. *How*, she wanted and did not want to ask. So she

didn't. She could feel his lips down her neck and thought of how those lips would go blue-black in the earth.

"God," she says, as if she believes in Him. "How do you know?"

"His mom called me today. Got my number from his phone."

Meredith's hand grips her knee, travels up her leg. Tori doesn't think to stop her.

"Is there a funeral?"

"No. They had a secret funeral already. But we're having a memorial, next weekend. We're going to the barn. We'll say a few words about him, you know. We're meeting at my house. If you want to come. If you can stay a while."

"I'll be there," Tori says.

The phone goes quiet. Meredith doesn't ask who it was, what it was, and Tori moves her leg so that Meredith's hand falls away.

"What's up?" Meredith asks, crossing her arms across her chest.

"Daniel's dead. Killed himself."

Meredith's eyes widen. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"Will you go to the memorial with me next weekend?"

"I can't. I have a family thing next weekend, out of town. I already told them I'd go."

"Right." Tori nods, though what Meredith said seems strange, like déjà vu again. Tori remembers her grandfather's death, how her tears made Meredith anxious, how Meredith shrugged stiffly, told Tori she had to leave. That she had a family reunion to go to. Left Tori on the edge of her bed, clutching her own shaking body. "Right," Tori says.

Tori leaves the fire, goes inside, locks the door behind her. No one bothers her for hours, and when they do, she ignores the knocks, the pleas to please let them in to use the restroom. She googles Daniel's name. She finds an old arrest brief from Daniel's breaking-and-entering charge, which happened the year after college. Daniel had called her about it, drunk and sorry for himself. But there is no obituary, no news of a suicide. She searches for hours and finds nothing more, her fingers a fever on the keys, her mind a blank race of guilty thoughts. Could she have saved him? She wishes she had someone to tell her that she couldn't have. But it sounds as if, outside, the party has moved on.

It's the hour of nothing good when there is another knock at the door.

"Please open up," Kay says. "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

When Tori opens the door, Kay wraps shur arms around her. Tori shakes in shur embrace. "What's wrong?" Kay asks, running shur hands through Tori's hair. "What happened?"

Tori tells her everything. "Doesn't it sound fishy?" she asks. "There's nothing, nothing at all online about him."

"It's weird, but maybe they just wanted to keep it secret. Don't tear yourself up about this, okay? Listen, I'll go with you, if you want, to the memorial."

Tori lets herself disappear beneath Kay's armpit. Breathes in the musk smell. She will let shur take care of her. Will let shur hold her and hide her from the light. Will let shur apologize for her and, yes, even love her.

HAVING GROWN UP in the city, Kay says during the drive down from Riddle, shu has never been in a town like Agape.

"As you can see, you're not missing much," Tori says as she navigates the car along the one road which curves like a snake through the small town, from the high school to the diner to the post office to the elementary to the gated community of houses which could fit five of Tori's tiny duplex within their walls. This is her past, laid bare without the itch in the throat, though Tori has brought along the last of her nostalgia for the memorial.

"I bet you could take some great photographs here," Kay says as they pass the stone mega church. "Will the memorial be there?"

The memorial. For the length of the drive, she let herself forget, but now she must remember. Every bitter detail. There will be no turning around. For the last week she has felt on edge, always shaking in the night, looking every day for information, calling up old friends to see if they have heard. And no one else has.

"No," Tori says. "Not there."

To stop her shaking, and because she cannot, at the moment, go on to Logan's, Tori stops at

the town's only coffee shop, a little place with crosses on the walls and in a jewelry case at the front counter. The young man behind the counter is someone Tori used to know, an old friend. Jaden. She wonders why, smart boy like him, he never got out of this place.

"How are you?" he asks, smiling briefly at Kay before looking back to Tori. Kay stands with shur arms in shur jacket pockets.

Tori shrugs. "Okay enough, considering the occasion."

"What occasion?"

He doesn't know, she realizes with cold dread. Although he and Daniel were never best friends, were never lovers, they were close. As if shu can read her, Kay grabs her hand.

"Daniel's dead," Tori says. "Killed himself."

"What? When was this?" Jaden says.

"Three weeks ago."

He laughs. The sound is a fire alarm. When he realizes Tori isn't laughing with him, he opens his mouth, shuts it. "I saw Daniel at the general store last night. He was fine."

Cold dread is becoming as familiar as a fever. Because this news is neither good nor bad; it moves into her gut and twists her insides.

"Excuse me," she says, and she rushes from the coffee shop, the door's jingle a throb in her head. Beside the car, she calls Logan. He answers on the first ring.

"Where are you?" he asks. "You're late. The rest of the gang is here already. We're ready to go."

"Daniel's alive," Tori says. "Jaden says they saw him last night, at work."

"That's impossible," Logan says.

"I'm telling you, I just saw Jaden, and he says Daniel is one hundred percent fine."

"We're all here. Waiting for you. Just come on. It'll be like old times. We can't know for certain. Let's just have the memorial, go out to the barn, share some bowls. Say a few words. In honor of Daniel. I mean, his mom called me. She called me the day it happened, a week ago. She was crying. There's no way she was faking that."

"A week ago," Tori says. And she knows then not to argue. She hangs up. Kay has joined her beside the car, and without explaining where they're going, they climb in. Tori drives. She remembers the way; she would remember it with her eyes closed. Back then she took this road out of mind. She is out of mind again, and no drug has passed through her system since the night before, when Kay watched her smoke a bowl of nostalgia to black.

Daniel's father's house is stone, situated back from the road and surrounded by lean live oaks. The yard is dark, and as they walk hand in hand up the gravel path. Tori's heart hammers in her chest. Before they reach the door, a man emerges, his arms crossed.

"Can I help you?"

"We're looking for Daniel," Tori says. She doesn't know if Daniel's father will remember her. If he knows that she was the first woman to strip him down and take him into her mouth, to crawl on top of him and initiate him into the world of lovers. That she has regretted that decision, and not only because Daniel wasn't ready, not only because Daniel blamed her for losing himself. "I'm an old friend. I had dinner here once." Matzo balls in broth. Toast and steamed Brussels sprouts.

"Not really, but my memory's not all it used to be. Daniel's in his room, up there. Do you want me to go get him?"

Tori's body wilts. Relief. She thinks about the last time she saw him, his hair tangled, clothes baggy and torn, eyes bloodshot. The memories overwhelmed her like a drug, and it was because of him that she no longer frequented Agape unless she needed to. Unless she needed nostalgia shoved into clear plastic baggies.

"No, thanks," she says. "I'm tired of rehashing. But he's not dead?"

"Dead? No, Daniel's not dead. Why?"

"A friend lied to me," she says.

"Doesn't sound like a friend to me." Daniel's father's arms have come uncrossed, and Tori isn't sure when in the conversation it happened, but it seems to signal some small degree of remembrance. And what else could she ask for but to be remembered?

"Yeah," she says. "Thanks so much. Don't tell Daniel I was here, please."

The man nods. "I remember you," he says. "I won't."

Tori and Kay turn and walk from the driveway, slower this time, Tori listening to the crunch of

their footsteps on the path. Kay's hand in hers makes her feel safe, as if Kay could protect her, if she needed it, which she doesn't.

They don't go to Logan's. Tori deletes his number from her phone, as she did Daniel's long ago. Later she will block it, too. She is not mad at him. She understands the urge to hold on, to keep the people who were once close nearby. To relive that which you remember in a hazy euphoria. Instead, she and Kay drive home, where they sit beside the fire and look, without speaking, into the waves of heat lifting to the sky like a mirage in the air. Tori doesn't load a bowl.

Kay snaps a picture of her in the firelight; when developed, it will show her body dark as night. She will not be smiling, though there will be a rosy fire glow on her cheeks.

"Can I?" Tori asks.

"So long as you don't drop it." Kay grins. Shur grin splits shur face like a crack to let light in.

The camera feels like her pipe in Tori's palm, the same weight.

IT WILL NOT be easy, Tori thinks, to stop. She will want to remember. Her photographs, then. She will capture the places she once loved, the people she will try to love in new ways. She opens the box on her desk and spreads the remaining nostalgia across a blank piece of paper. Arranges it to form a picture; a figure with no shape, no curves, no breasts, no genitals. Not too bad, she thinks. I can get used to it, she thinks.

The flash lightning cuts the room in half. Dots swim before Tori's eyes. She hopes the picture will come out, but there's no way to know until she develops it in the art building's darkroom. It's a beautiful feeling, to see and not see what the future will bring.

Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam lives in Texas with her partner and two literarily-named cats: Gimli and Don Quixote. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast program and curates an annual Art & Words Show, recently profiled in Poets & Writers. You can visit her on Twitter @BonnieJoStuffle or through her website: www.bonniejostufflebeam.com. This is her second and final year of Campbell Award eligibility.

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T.R. NAPPER

AN ADVANCED GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL PRICE-FIXING IN EXTRATERRESTRIAL BETTING MARKETS

ILLUSTRATED BY
WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

The key to walking up and down the stairs was both to randomise, and to play by the rules. The rules said you could not step on every stair, and wherever possible, not step on stairs with obvious stains: knots for wooden stairs, chewing gum for concrete, that sort of thing. So the rules, as such, were not too onerous. Randomising was basically to ensure that the aliens placing bets on which stairs I would step on would have a viable betting market. Some days I'd be creative – miss three steps, walk on one, miss another three. Those times I just knew there was some lucky alien punter up there grinning while they cashed in their long-shot ticket. Most of the time though I'd be rushing, or indifferent, or just exhausted and zombie-shuffling down them, bothering only to skip the last step. Those days I'd simply be guaranteeing minimal, steady returns for your conservative alien gambler. That's what I did this morning, missing only the last step as I slouched off the middle set of stairs, into the kitchen.

Vega smiled distractedly as I entered. She said: "Long night?"

"Haven't been to bed."

She looked up from her toast properly then, and did that disappointed-tilt-of-her-head thing she did. I got it often. "Altair."

"Vega."

Her breadknife, coated in vegemite, hovered above the toast like the Breadknife of Damocles. I wondered how the toast felt about this dramatic tension. She said: "Well?"

I sat down with a groan on the other side of the kitchen bench. I'd been on my butt all night, but I sat down with an authentic groan anyway. I asked, with deliberate obtuseness: "Well what?"

She gave me another head tilt. "Was it worth it?"

I grunted. "Coffee."

"Results, Altair."

I grunted again. "I was down three million."

"Shit."

"Then I tried a series of bets on the Hong Kong trots I'd been planning for a few months."

"And?"

"I went down eight."

"Altair," she said, and she lowered her hands to rest on the edge of the bench. The governor granted a reprieve to the toast, and instead made me the focus of her judgement.

"Then I went a little mad, and bet big on boxed trifectas at the Aqueduct in New York."

"I don't know what that means, but it sounds stupid."

"It was profoundly stupid."

"Isn't that computer of yours meant to be making these bets?"

"It is, but I was busy being profoundly stupid."

She looked me over with a laser-like stare that somehow combined x-ray vision, too. If eyes could burn like a laser *and* see right through you at the same time, that'd be Vega's superpower.

Then the laser cannons dropped to their original target and the toast met its fate: vegemite was duly smeared. She took a bite between rows of perfectly even, small white teeth. Her face was very pretty, sure, but that was merely a cunning mask to lure arrogant energy executives into the titanium-trapped cerebrum possessed by the smartest environmental defender this side of the equator. Titanium mind, laser eyes, it's like I'm married to a superhero. She'd look pretty fine in a skin-tight spandex costume, as well.

Vega raised an eyebrow. "Well, you're sitting there smelling of stale sweat. That pungent, nervous sweat you ooze when your horses aren't winning, that once upon a time you used to sweat when we first started dating. But you've also got that smug look in your eye and you're asking me for coffee, so I guess all those stupid bets paid off and you dug yourself out of a hole." She took another bite, then said: "Either that or you're imagining me as a supervillain again."

I laughed. "Come on, let me a least give you the slow reveal."

"I'm running too late," she said, slurping down the rest of her coffee, "for war stories from the battle lines of the race courses."

She entered the miasma of my odour, unconcerned, and kissed me on the lips. I kissed her back, wondering how I ended up with the smartest woman in the Spire. I also wondered how my breath smelled after twelve hours of coffee, peanuts, and feverish incantations to the capricious gods of gambling.

Vega paused on the stairs on the way out and looked back at me. Fortunately she had no consciousness of alien betting markets and therefore did not need to abide by the rules of stair-walking. She pointed her half-eaten toast at me. "You haven't left this apartment in weeks. You're taking me out to dinner tonight, buddy. So you're going to need to sleep, shower, and gargle whatever needs to be gargled to remove that stench of the underworld drifting out of your mouth."

"You prefer spearmint or peppermint?" I asked, smiling.

"I'm not sure that's going to be potent enough."

"Hundred proof rum?"

"Paint thinner might do the trick."

We smiled at each other and then she turned and mounted the stairs.

I heard the door slam upstairs as I moved across the black and white tiles of the kitchen, moving as the Knight moves in chess – stepping only two squares ahead and one to the side. The tiles were large, so there was little risk of stepping on the cracks between. There was no established betting market for my tile walking – I did it more as a ward against generalised ill fortune. A conservative, yet logical approach.

I said: "Kitchen, give me a double espresso."

A flat, uninflected voice replied, "Yes sir."

Ten seconds later a small, steaming cup of coffee popped out of the sleek black tabletop. I picked it up and walked from the kitchen over the floor-to-ceiling lounge-room windows, ensuring, of course, that the overall number of steps to the windows could be divided by three. I worked it so it took twenty-one paces.

I sipped my coffee and looked out at the wasteland. The blasted Marscape of the Australian desert, a thousand kilometres of broken red rocks and earth, suffering under the merciless burn of the sun's long lament. Soon, though, this apocalyptic vista would be terraformed by another form of sand, this one living: silica nanotech. My preternaturally talented wife was playing a lead role in that miracle – the transformation of sand into energy; from the red, baking earth into a frozen silver ocean. It would be the largest solar array in the world and the key to Australian energy independence.

So as I stood there, two hundred stories up in the Spire – a glittering needle pointed at the heavens, every inch coated in nano-silver particles, transforming the surface into a towering solar panel sufficient unto itself to power the city-sized population that lived within its sparkling walls – I stood, there on that monument to the ingenuity of humankind, and contemplated the third race at Moonee Valley. There was a horse called Gliese I had my eye on, racing three days hence. I figured I'd better get upstairs and run it through the system, see what it thought.

Someone cleared their throat. I started and turned, the small cup slipping from my hand and cracking on the hard, faux wood floor.

A heavyset guy I'd never seen before was sitting on the couch, smoking. Feet up on the cof-

fee table, wearing a rumpled grey suit, his grey fedora alongside his feet. He looked like he hadn't shaved in a day and the air smelled of burnt copper. His face was puffy and white and his eyes were just that little bit too close together, dark and glittering, like two black pebbles sitting in a big ball of uncooked pizza dough.

He nodded – like breaking into someone's house, sitting on their couch, and smoking a cigarette was the most normal thing in the world – and said: "Spaceman, how you doing?"

I froze. Well, I was already frozen, but even more so – I was carbonite. Spaceman was a stupid nickname I'd earned in high school. I know what burnt copper smells like, as an aside, from the time the rocket ship I made for science class melted on the launch pad. The fuel mix I'd concocted consumed the rocket in an inferno of white-and-green fire and explosive curses from the science teacher. As it turns out, maths, and not chemistry, was my forte. So I got the name Spaceman, though it'd been twenty years since I'd been called it.

This biographical detail, however, was somewhat trivial right now compared to the matter at hand: the random stranger in my lounge room. I unfroze and stepped backwards, sidling my way to the kitchen whilst the intruder watched me, amused. I didn't count the steps back, so they may not have been divisible by three. Even worse, the number of steps could have ended on a prime number. I was that distracted.

I pulled out the largest carving knife we had from the rack and said, way calmer than expected: "House: call security. Tell them there's an intruder inside."

I waited. No reply. The intruder smiled, content to slowly blow out a thick cloud of smoke and watch it rise, languorously, to the ceiling.

"House," I repeated.

Nothing.

"House?"

"I've turned off your security system, Spaceman," said the man, "you're wasting your time."

"What? How?"

"With my mind of course."

The point of the knife, which I had lowered slowly in my confusion, now rose again to pinpoint the intruder. "Sure," I said, and then looked up at the ceiling. "House?"

The intruder rolled his little black eyes.

I took a deep breath. "Buddy, you need to leave."

"Oh, I will, I will – no problem. As soon as I get what I'm owed."

I furrowed my brow. I made a lot of bets – or the system I built did anyway – thousands even, every day, but as a point of pride I never took a loan and never welched on a bet. Not since meeting Vega, anyway.

I said: "I have no idea what you are talking about."

He sighed, exhaling smoke through his nostrils as he did so. "I hate this part."

"What part?"

"The *convincing* part. All you big-time gamblers, making huge bets with aliens on how many cracks you can avoid stepping on, or how many prime numbers you'll see in a twenty-four hour cycle, or on which steps you'll step on, or whatever. All these big bets, yet when we come down to collect you act all surprised, all innocent as to your obligations."

He'd lost me. "Huh?"

He took his feet off the coffee table and leaned forward, speaking slowly. "Are you saying you don't randomise your steps while walking up and down the stairs in order to set markets for extraterrestrial betting pools?"

"I do," I said, "but…"

"But?"

"But that's all inside my head."

He shook his head, flicking his cigarette butt onto the floor. "Nothing is ever just inside your head. You people just can't seem to get that."

We looked at each other in silence. The intruder lit another cigarette. I wondered whether I was dreaming. Or worse, whether it was starting again.

The intruder cleared his throat and said: "Firstly, stop calling me the intruder. You can call me Bruce."

The knife was well and truly dangling in one hand now, forgotten. I whispered: "You can read my mind?"

"Spaceman, you've been psychically setting markets for my book for the last twelve months, obviously I can read your mind."

There wasn't really much I could say to that. He was right, after all. So I suspended disbelief, if just for the moment. "Bruce," I said, "you're an alien called Bruce."

"I just picked a common name for Australians. Aren't you all called Bruce?"

I shook my head. "I've never heard anyone called that." I moved over to the kitchen bench and sat down with my back to it, eyes on the intruder. The alien. Bruce. "You don't talk like an alien."

Bruce shrugged. "Of course not, if I spoke my true language, your testicles would rupture and your brain ooze slowly out of your nose."

I grabbed my testicles. "Really?"

He laughed. "Of course not. You just wouldn't be able to hear it."

"What's the second thing?"

"Huh?"

"You said 'firstly, stop calling me intruder'. What's the next thing?"

"Oh right," he said, nodding to himself. "The second thing is you're not going crazy. That's the problem with human beings, you have phenomenological minds. You can't experience the universe beyond anything other than the narrow space between your ears, which always makes this to-and-fro I have with you people tedious in the extreme. It also usually leaves us where we started: with you convinced that I'm a hallucination and me with no verifiable means of proving otherwise."

"Huh. So your mind isn't in a physical body? Like a telepathic space spirit or something?"

"Or something," he said, dryly. "I'm just an extension, you might say, of a far larger being."

"Like an arm?"

"I'm not quite that important."

"A toenail?" I asked, smiling.

He looked me over, unsmiling. "I guess you'd call me the fist." He took a drag on the cigarette. "This is where things get unpleasant."

Before I knew what was happening, the knife was moving, and my right hand was moving it. I watched wide-eyed as I put my left arm out, exposing the inside of the arm. Slowly, steadily, and without the slightest pause, I put the blade of the carving knife against the soft white skin on the inside of my forearm. I gritted my teeth, a drop of sweat rolled down my brow, but I couldn't do anything but watch as the knife sliced the inside of my arm, a long, deep cut. I tried to scream but my jaw seemed frozen in place. Blood welled in the wound and trickled down, dripping onto the floor.

The ethereal iron grip on my body disappeared and I fell from the stool, landing on the hard faux wood with a grunt, the knife skittering across the floor. Blood drained between my fingers as I tried to put pressure on the wound and then Bruce was right there, white bandage in hand, binding the gash in my arm. He steered me over to the sofa and sat me down, making reassuring noises. Then he seated himself opposite, put his feet up on the coffee table, and lit another cigarette.

I sat staring at him, open mouthed. I'd never been stabbed before, and certainly never mind-control-by-an-alien-collecting-imaginary-bets-stabbed. You can understand my consternation.

After a time it became clear he was waiting for me to say something. So I did, with a stutter-step. "I…I…I can pay you. I'm very wealthy."

"That's more like it. But I'm afraid your currency is inappropriate," he said affably, like the whole cutting me with a blade thing was already forgotten. "It's conceptual – the idea of value, represented in spots of data in your archaic computing systems. We did away with conceptual currency millennia ago; it's too volatile, too unpredictable and has a tendency to self-replicate in tune to the vivid imaginations of the grasping spivs that command your financial systems. It's *primitive* to say the least."

He took another drag on his cigarette, exhaled the smoke through his nose. "Our currency is in tangible, practical units of energy. They are all real, immensely valuable in their own right. They are currency, but they are also the fuel we use to fold space, the energy that powers our worlds, and the sustenance our beings subsist on. We treat our money with respect."

"Respect," I repeated. I was annoyed, I don't mind saying, and the annoyance was doing battle with my fear. "By creating betting markets based on the imaginary bets of punters from a world of *primitive* spivs?"

Bruce the alien raised finger and eyebrows

simultaneously. "But that is the thing, Spaceman – your vivid imaginations are one of the very few things we cannot predict accurately. The human mind: an irreducible mix of reason and un-reason, logic and rage and sexually-charged aggression. And inconsistent – take your neural-atypical brain type, Spaceman – you're a freak among freaks. Human beings have such spectacular, wild irrationality. You people have a one in fifty chance of dying every time you send someone to your Mars colony, but you still have people lining up to travel to that dead red rock; you expose yourself to solar radiation in order to darken your skin, even though forty per cent of Australians develop skin cancer as a result; you have a one in four-hundred-and-seventy chance of dying by infectious disease, yet spend all your medical research on penile erection and three-dimensional printing for new faces and breasts; and speaking of which, one in forty-five heart attacks occur during vigorous sex, yet you people just won't stop banging each other. In this silver building of yours right now there are nineteen couples having intercourse, twelve vigorously, one involving a swing set and loud music by some group called AC/DC. You are truly one of the strangest, most risk-prone species in the galaxy. It's a wonder you've lasted this long."

I put my hand under my wounded arm, reliving some of the pressure on it, unsure of how to react. This day defied a straightforward emotional response.

"You sit around watching people have sex?" I asked.

Bruce's eyes narrowed. "I study you people, the way you spend innumerable hours studying horse data to input into your betting algorithm."

"Right. I don't ever recall studying a feed of those horses shagging."

"It's all part of understanding the market."

I nodded in the way you nod when you think someone is full of shit: slowly, with eyes wide open in sarcastic agreement. "Right. Research. Sure." I leaned back into the soft leather of the sofa. "You seem awfully risk averse for a species so interested in gambling."

"No one dies gambling, Spaceman. None of our race dies at all, really, though some of us choose to fade away. Gambling using the telepathic betting markets of lower life forms is one of the very few ways we can experience the rush of risk and randomness. It is very popular."

He opened his palms. "No, gambling ain't dangerous at all," he said, and everything in his disposition changed – a seamless transition from affable to threatening. "Not to my race, anyway."

"What does that mean?"

"People in your situation, who make the decision to create betting markets with us, well, you have around a two in three chance of dying."

I shifted on the seat. "What? How?"

"The way all gamblers die, Spaceman. First I break the knees, and when that doesn't work, the neck. I've been doing this a long time, so listen when I tell you that if you do die, your refusal to believe will kill you about half the time. Not being able to pay kills you the other half."

"Okay, okay," I said, making calming air-pats with my good hand. "How much do I owe you?"

"Three energy units."

"Oh. Is that all?"

"Three energy units are roughly equivalent to about two billion dollars, in your currency."

I was silent. My arm hurt. I needed a coffee. A shower. And two billion dollars. "How long do I have?"

"A week."

"You're kidding."

"No. Now, I've got to go. Visits like this cost considerable energy, which I will be adding to your bill. You need to walk up and down the stairs five hundred times today. Completely randomise your steps. We're going to hit the market hard and fast. Your recent predictability in stair-walking has left me out of pocket and my customers are placing an increasing number of bets on your most frequent stepping patterns. This will blindside them completely."

"Five hundred?" There were three storeys and six sets of stairs to my apartment, all connected. I was relatively lean, but that was from forgetting to eat meals while studying horse racing data rather than exercise. We had a gym on the bottom floor, though I think the weights were still in their plastic wrapping. I said: "I'm not sure I can do that."

Bruce's black-pebbled eyes glittered. "You'll do it, Spaceman. Because if you don't, I'm not going

to go after you, not at first anyway. I'm going after Vega."

I felt my face heat up. I stood and yelled, "Don't you dare—" But he was already gone, leaving behind only the smell of cigarettes and burnt copper.

Late afternoon. Drenched in sweat. Wearing the same clothes from the night before. I'd made two hundred and eighty-three trips up and down the stairs. My left ankle ached from where I twisted it trying to leap six stairs at once and the blood was showing through the white bandage on my arm. I lay on the couch, taking a break.

"Altair? What the hell?"

I jumped up. I'd been dozing, apparently. I wiped the drool from the corner of my mouth and looked around.

Vega was standing near the kitchen bench, hands on hips. "What is going on? You haven't even changed from this morning." Her voice held a mix of irritation and disappointment. The latter was always hard for me to hear.

"I'm sorry," I said, voice bruised by exhaustion.

She sniffed the air, then spoke, rapid-fire. "It smells like gym socks in here. You look terrible. And whose cigarette butts are those are on the floor?"

I hesitated. There really wasn't any question whether I'd tell her about the alien invader. I said: "Mine. I was stressed so I tried smoking. It was inexplicably dumb."

She took a deep breath. "Why are you so stressed?"

"I, ah, I ran into some trouble. I think there's a flaw in the algorithm for the neural network. All my bets turned sour today. I've taken it off-line while I search for the problem."

Vega nodded, though not at what I was saying. "I take it this means you can't leave the apartment?" she asked.

I only had the energy to nod once.

Her expression was flat. "What's the rush?"

"Huh?"

She paced around the floor, eyes on me, stopping in front of the windows. "Why not take your time fixing the algorithm? There's no reason it has to be fixed today, is there?"

I searched my mind for an excuse, but I was just too tired to think of a supplementary lie.

Her expression softened. "Altair?"

"Vega."

"You off your medication again?"

I shook my head. "I've been off it for weeks and I've been fine. I don't need to be medicated."

"You've been off it for weeks," she repeated. The look she gave said it all: disappointment, sadness, and a healthy dose of *well obviously you need to be medicated.*

Vega sighed and sat down on the couch next to me. She pointed at my bandage with her eyes. "What happened?"

"Oh." I looked down at the arm. "Just tired, slipped trying to make a sandwich. You know."

"Big sandwich?"

I smiled a weak smile.

She put her hand on my leg. "Babe. Your gambling sessions are getting longer and longer, and you're doing more and more of the bets yourself, rather letting your betting machine do them. You're not sleeping or eating, and you're refusing to leave the house. You've probably been talking to yourself for half the day, right?"

There was concern in her eyes. Mine started to gleam. I said: "Yeah." She was right. Bruce seemed so distant now – surreal and unbelievable. I shook my head, grimacing at the thought of the day I'd just endured. "You're right."

She sighed. "We're not going through this again Altair. You're better than this. So this is what we are going to do: we're going to have a good meal, here. Then you're going to take a sleeping pill. In the morning you'll be a new man. We'll go out tomorrow morning, take a nice long walk, and maybe try breakfast at one of those new cafes on the hundredth floor."

She was right, again. She was always right. I nodded.

I showered, washing away the grime and fear. Ravenous, I ate a huge bowl of risotto. Exhausted, I took a pill and fell asleep, Vega's hand in mine.

Vega didn't wake up in the morning.

I didn't notice at first. I woke up, feeling wonderfully rested. Vega's short dark hair was covering her eyes and she seemed deep asleep, head buried in her pillow. I went to the kitchen,

got myself a double espresso, walked twenty-one steps to the window and looked out at the Marscape. Then I went upstairs, making sure not to step on every stair, and looked over my new algorithm weightings for weather patterns over the Hong Kong races.

Immersed in the maths, I didn't realise until ten o'clock that Vega hadn't awoken. She was never late for work.

I went back downstairs and found her exactly as I had left her, head buried in the pillow. My chest tightened. "Vega?"

No response.

I walked around to her side of the bed, put a hand on her shoulder and said, louder this time: "Vega?"

She didn't stir.

I shook her, saying her name louder and louder. Her body was limp and cold under my hand. I put the tips of my fingers to her neck. At first I couldn't feel a thing but there, fluttering, weak, was a pulse.

I yelled at the house to get a medical team to the apartment. They turned up five minutes later and I was frantic, yabbering at them as we went down the stairs and getting in their way as they took Vega's vitals.

The female paramedic unfurled a flexiscreen on the edge of the bed and studied the green glowing icons scrolling down the screen. I asked her what was wrong.

She looked up at her partner and then me. "I don't know, it looks…" She trailed off.

"It looks like what?"

"Like a coma."

"She was fine last night," I said, anger creeping into my voice, "just fine. How is that possible?"

Her professional patina reasserted itself. "I don't know, sir. We're going to take her to the emergency room now."

"Yes, yes. Good."

"Does she take drugs?" she asked, as they shifted her on to a silver gurney that seemed to float in the air at the end of the bed.

I shook my head. "No. No, never."

"She on any medications?"

"None. Nothing."

"Positive?"

"*Positive*. Now stop asking stupid questions and get her to the hospital."

Her gaze was flat in response. "Right away, sir."

I followed them as they guided the stretcher up the stairs. As I stepped onto the landing near the front door, I caught something at the periphery of my vision. I turned and there, down a short hallway from the entryway, was Bruce. He was standing out in the open in my office, mouth smiling, eyes cold. The paramedics didn't seem to notice him.

The woman looked at me. "Coming, sir?"

I glanced back at Bruce. He shook his head slowly, still smiling.

I rubbed my forehead and put my hand on Vega's chest. Her face was pale, covered in a thin sheen of sweat. The paramedics had stuck a small round device on her forehead, little green lights blinked on and off around its circumference. Tears welled in my eyes. I cleared my throat and said: "In a minute, in a minute."

The paramedics looked at each other. The woman said to me: "We'll put her in the emergency ward on the second floor."

They didn't wait any longer. The door closed. I stood, clenching and unclenching my fists. In my mind I repeated, like a mantra: *black box black box black box black box*. I ducked into the laundry that sat between the front door and my office (*black box black box black box black box*) then walked back to where Bruce was waiting (*black box black box black box black box*), looking perplexed. I walked right up to him (*black box black box black box black box*) and shoved the screwdriver I was hiding behind my back into his stomach.

Bruce grunted, eyes wide with surprise, and staggered back.

I said: "I remember pretty much everything I've ever read, *Bruce*. It's one of the quirks of my atypical brain."

He was trying to pull the screwdriver out of his stomach, his white shirt a spreading stain of fresh blood.

I continued. "Four years ago I read a story about mind control. A speculative piece, but in a scientific journal."

Bruce plonked down on the hard floor in the centre of the room.

"It discussed new experiments – military ex-

periments actually – on thought patterns and mind control. The thing they proved was this: it's really, really easy to disrupt thought patterns. You just need to repeat the same phrase, over and over and over."

Bruce was looking down at his stomach, his blood-slicked hands unable to gain purchase on the screwdriver's handle.

I circled him slowly. "This is the problem you face when you mess with a crazy person, Bruce: they're crazy. I have this problem, you see, makes it difficult for me to feel empathy. And that's just with human beings. Imagine how I feel about an alien gangster debt collector." I stopped in front of him, looking down. "Who *hurts my wife*."

His fumbling faded. The pool of blood Bruce sat in was large now, expanding. He looked up at me one last time, made to say something, then collapsed back on the floor. His glazed eyes pointed up at the ceiling.

I stayed there, standing over the body.

They didn't call me Spaceman because I immolated the rocket. I had that name before the rocket incident ever happened. They called me Spaceman because I was weird. Borderline Asperger's, they said. I either never spoke at all in class, or spoke endlessly in answer to a particular question until the other kids started laughing and the teacher sent me from the room. I couldn't look people in the eye, catch a ball, or understand the humour in fart jokes.

One day a kid was teasing me, the same as he did every other day. I was much younger, smaller than the other kids – so picking on me, calling me a retard, sticking me in the dumpster, was particularly easy. I just endured it. But this one day I snapped and beat him bloody. I was expelled. And that was that.

The incident was yet another reason why I never understood the world. A bully can ply his trade for years, breaking down his peers psychologically and physically; turning the years of adolescence into a long, drawn out form of torture that some kids take a lifetime to get over. But you break that bully's jaw with a cricket bat, and you're the bad guy.

People and their arbitrary rules remained a mystery to me. But maths – this was effable. It was the only thing that gave me solace, and I retreated into it whenever I could. Numbers were pure and clean and ordered, and if you worked long enough, they'd divulge their secrets to you.

I wasn't just good at maths either, I was a prodigy.

My father used to tell – well, anyone who'd listen – about the time when I was two years old, at family Christmas, explaining arithmetic to my older cousin, who was six. I'd learned it watching Sesame Street.

At nine years old I was the second youngest participant in the history of the International Mathematical Olympiad. At fifteen I received my Masters in Pure Mathematics at Sydney University and at twenty I received my PhD at the University of the People's Californian Republic. At twenty-two I was appointed full professor at the Mathematical Sciences Institute in Australia and at twenty-three I received the Young Australian of the Year Award for my breakthroughs in harmonic analysis and analytic number theory.

"And at twenty-four you discovered horse racing."

I jumped, literally. Behind me, standing in the doorway was Bruce, smiling a rotten-dough smile at me. I glanced back: his other body was still there.

Bruce put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He inhaled deep, exhaled through his nose and held the smoke up between index and middle finger. "Got to say. Best thing about being here is these nicotine sticks. Tasty."

He walked around the room, looking over my office. It was sparsely decorated: three large Tai screens for watching the races and an elegant silver neural cap sitting on a small black stand, enabling me to watch the same races inside my head, if I wanted. A battered brown leather couch I could nap on while the betting system was working something over and the system itself: a shiny black box with its sole, blinking red light.

Bruce glanced over all this as he spoke. "At twenty-four you discovered horse racing – that beautiful contest, the perfect mathematical problem. So many variables, so many unknowns: the condition of the track; the weather; the horse's breeding and psychology; the pace of the race; the jockey – their temperament, family situa-

tion, what they had for breakfast; the trainer; the level of corruption at each track; and on and on and on. So many variables, so many unknowns, but still a problem that you believed you could divine an answer for. Like you were going to solve the horse racing equivalent of Fermat's Last Theorem."

He stopped at the black betting box, looking down at it. "You could have spent a lifetime at the track, if you'd been allowed. Drinking free tea from an urn, hitching up the only pair of pants you owned, betting your last twenty dollars on a roughie in the last race of the day."

Bruce turned and looked at me. "The best days of your life, right?"

I nodded slowly. "Until I met Vega."

"Until you met Vega years later, no longer homeless, doing pretty well for yourself – wealthy, even. But still a degenerate, still down at the track, day in, day out. All alone, abandoned by your family. But she convinced you to build your system, said you were 'an analogue man in a nanotech world'. She was right, wasn't she?"

"Why do you know so much about me?"

"Simple. You're my prize stallion, Spaceman. I know everything about you. I study you the same way as you study your horses."

Bruce walked over to his other body, lying on the ground. He nodded at it admiringly. "This is what I'm talking about. Glorious irrationality: like you can take on an advanced alien civilisation with a screwdriver. We just never know what you people are going to do next."

"But that blood…" I pointed, hand shaking, at the crimson pool on the floor. "It's real. I killed you."

"You can't kill me, I'm a projection. I'm not even here."

"But you're smoking a real cigarette. You can pick things up and move them around. You wrapped my arm in a bandage."

Bruce smiled, shaking his head. "You people really are primitive."

He moved over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. I looked down at it, numb. He said: "Now, Spaceman, we need to make some money. Because I don't know if your wife is going to make it through another day."

Three hours later I was trudging up the stairs, legs shaking with exhaustion. The hospital had been trying to contact me since the paramedics had left. I'd told them to tell me if Vega's condition changed. The woman at the other end of the line said I had to fill out some forms about my wife's medical history. I'd cut the connection.

I slumped down on the top step, arms on knees, my shirt clinging to the sweat on my back. I rested my head against the bars of the railing, looking down the block spiral of stairs descending to the hard floor down below. I bit down on the sob rising in my chest and closed my eyes, pressing my forehead hard against the bars like I was trying to punish my sadness.

After a time the feeling passed. I opened my eyes again, staring downwards. Each flight of stairs was set into one of four walls as it descended, forming a square when looked at from above. The set-up was slightly angled, such that the balustrade at the top floor sat directly over the bottom step on the last flight, three floors below.

I sat up straight. I knew what to do. I stomped around my office, yelling for Bruce to come down. A minute later he was there, leaning against the door frame, fedora shading his eyes, filling the room with the scent of burnt copper.

"Yes, Spaceman?"

I walked up to him, breathing quickly with exhaustion and excitement. "You run the book for the stairs, right?"

"Right."

"So what happens when I choose a combination that hasn't been picked?"

"It won't happen. Every option is covered."

"Let's pretend it did. The prize pool goes to the house?"

Bruce shrugged. "Sure."

"Is the pool bigger than my debts?"

"Easily."

I told him my plan. He pushed the fedora up high on his forehead with one finger, and looked me in the eye. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

He smiled that cold smile, black-pebble eyes glittering, and put his hand on my shoulder. "I knew you'd come through, Spaceman."

I looked down over the balustrade. I'm not scared of heights as such; it is not a particular phobia of mine. But still, everyone is afraid of heights. I read somewhere that human beings have only two fears they are born with as part of their natural condition: fire and falling. I consoled myself that the stairwell wasn't ablaze and swung my legs over the railing, butt cheeks on the balustrade.

I said: "House: call the hospital, have them send paramedics."

"Yes sir. What is the nature of the medical emergency?"

"I've had a serious fall."

"Yes sir."

I didn't hesitate. I jumped, aiming to hit any, or all, of the last three steps. Hit them I did.

It would have been nice if this faded to black. Skip to hospital scene. And it did, eventually. But not before I lay on the faux wood floor, mouth open in silent scream as I looked at the bones sticking out of my legs. Trying and failing to staunch the blood spurting out of the wounds, numb hands wet with blood. Not before I threw up from the pain, making gagging noises like a sick animal. But yeah, after all that, it faded to black.

White walls, white sheets, and Vega's smile, smiling down at me. She sat on the edge of the bed, holding my hand.

"Altair."

I squeezed her hand back. My mouth was dry, my head clearer than you'd expect, given the situation. "Vega."

"You're awake."

"So are you."

"Hm. I woke up, fully recovered, just in time to hear you'd been taken to emergency." She tilted her head at me. "I wondered what it was going to take to get you out of the apartment."

I smiled. "Maybe next time I'll settle for a dinner date. Less messy."

She smiled back, but the concern in her eyes was clear. "Yeah. I think we're going to have to talk about that."

We were silent for a few moments. Whatever drugs they'd given me were sublime; I could feel nothing from the waist down. I said: "Did they figure out what was wrong with you?"

She raised an eyebrow. "They're idiots."

I shifted, pulling myself up higher on my pillow. "What did they say?"

"They said I overdosed on sleeping pills."

I felt tightness in my chest. "What?"

"It's bullshit, I know."

I rubbed my head. I'd poured her the glass of water she'd drunk just before going to bed that night. I scratched at the thin scar the carving knife had made on the inside of my arm.

Vega was saying something.

I whispered. "What?"

She put a cool hand on my forehead. "You with me? I said: what happened?"

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, what happened with what?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Falling off the stairs."

I took a deep breath and took her hand in mine. "Oh. Nothing. Just, um, clumsy, I guess."

"Clumsy," she repeated.

I lay there in distracted silence, trying to find the line of logic in the stream of events.

"I thought maybe you'd been drinking, celebrating your big win."

"Huh?"

She tilted her head at me. "They told me the drugs you're on wouldn't affect your mental clarity. More bullshit, by the look of it." She put her other hand on my chest, making sure she had all my attention. "I got a notification from the bank last night. Our apartment has been paid off, in full."

I lay there in silence, mind racing, while Vega looked at me, expectant. I gave her a weak smile and she smiled back, strong. The lie that followed was as limp as my smile. "Maybe I did have couple of drinks. I was, ah, going to surprise you."

The truth, as always, was mine to bear alone.

Vega was about to say something when a nurse entered the room without knocking. Blue smock, harried expression, he nodded at Vega and said to me: "Let's talk about your medication."

Vega stroked my hair and kissed me on the forehead, then excused herself so she could go get a coffee.

The nurse put down a small plastic tray that had little square boxes set into it, each with one red pill, blue pill and green-and-white pill. He

indicated them with his hand. "We got a few things here to get your body and mind right."

"My mind?"

He sighed, nodding at the doorway Vega had just exited through. "Talk to your wife. It's just starting you up on your old medication again, that's all. There's also some nanomeds in here to speed up blood production and help your bones knit. You'll be out of here in a day or two." He put a small plastic cup of water next to the tray, and then plucked up a yellow-and-white pill sitting separate from the others. "Take this now, then three of each of these pills for the next six days. In a week you'll need to come back to the hospital for reassessment."

I stared at the tray. There were six rows, three pills in each row, plus the one in the nurse's hand. Nineteen pills.

"Sir?"

I looked up. "Sure, yes, I understand. Thank you."

He raised an eyebrow. "Now don't miss any. You're going to need all of them for your recovery."

"No problem," I said, waving him away

The nurse shrugged and departed, looking down at his glowing flexiscreen and, presumably, his next patient.

After he left I looked back at the rows of pills. Nineteen. Obviously I wasn't going to get better taking a *prime number* of pills. If nothing else, this was clear. I took three of the pills and shoved them under the mattress. Sixteen remained. I could work with sixteen. I swallowed the yellow-and-white pill and settled back into my pillow.

I smiled as I thought about Vega, safe, and returning with her to our apartment, together. I thought about standing at the windows, drinking my coffee, and watching my wife's passion transform the very earth on which the city stood.

But more than anything I thought about the third race at Moonee Valley.

T.R. Napper is an aid worker, stay-at-home father, and writer. He is a Writers of the Future winner and his non-fiction has been widely published. This is his second appearance in *Interzone*. He currently lives in Ha Noi, Vietnam. His website can be found here at www.nappertime.com, and he can be found here on twitter: @DarklingEarth.

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PANDORA HOPE

the ferry man

The first thing I do when I wake up is try to think of a reason not to die.

ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN

There used to be reasons. I woke up with them I guess, an unheard background noise that was always there. I never noticed, till the reasons just left.

Back on the waterways the boys used to joke how I found my bride on the cursed rock of Kjosfossen, where most ferries found only disaster when their hulls were ripped out. Heldig, they called me – the Lucky One.

The fjordsmen know that one day your ferry will arrive at the black shore, even if your name is the Lucky One and you've caught yourself a siren for a wife. Your span of luck starts running when you leave the morning shore and the ferry moves across the water to the shores of night. Each man prays for an ocean to lie between the shores, but sometimes the sea is as thin as a finger bone. The fjordsmen are a superstitious lot and while they might wear Christ's cross, they carry Njord's rune stone in their pockets.

I lost my rune stone long ago but I lost the gods even before that. So now I didn't have anyone left to curse. I lay in bed and waited for the rage to come, but there was nothing. It was like when Smithy hit on me for a smoke, and I always shuffled my jacket pockets as if they were empty, pretending not to feel the squashed packet of Marlboro Soft. I watched his expression flatten, the hope turn sour. He reminded me of the way the dog kept returning to sniff its food bowl even though it knew it would be empty.

I didn't want the dog. I hated the way it was always watching me. It had a reason to live. The reason was in a can and I was the man with the can opener. I made it wait for the food. It was Carrie's idea, the dog. Barry would have sensed there was a wrongness in doing that. A dog wouldn't fit right in the space Elsa left behind. But Carrie would have been at him and at him with "Your dad's lonely, Baz, a dog would be looovely company now Mum's gone."

Carrie scattered around words from her favourite soapies like she was testing them out, seeing how well they fitted her. She was like a person who was born empty and was creating herself as she went along. I never liked how she called Elsa 'mum'. She said it the first time she met Elsa; she hugged her and called her mum like she owned her. Barry and Elsa looked startled, as if Carrie had announced she was the Empress of China. And she had said that too, just not aloud.

I hear things other people don't hear. More often now, since Elsa died. The sound of the fjord, water falling from a high place, breaking apart on the rocks far below, like a body would break. Sometimes I would see her – a girl sitting on the rock. She flickered in and out of the sunlight, disappearing in a froth of lace. I wondered why she wore a wedding dress. But of course it was only foam exploding as it hit the rock. Her arms were wrapped around her knees; she stared into the sun and I thought she was singing. Her mouth opened, but the thundering water swallowed all sound.

Carrie said I heard things because I was alone too much. 'Hearing things' was a sign of a disease too terrible for her to name. Why didn't I go back to the factory, she said, now that I didn't need to look after Elsa anymore? Or what about the pub; take the dog for a walk maybe? But those were not good enough reasons.

So I lay in bed and strained to hear the song lost in the waters of the fjord, but of course it had been taken from me along with everything else. I turned and looked at Elsa's pillow. At least I hadn't let Carrie change the pillow case, so it still had strands of Elsa's hair on it. They were that dyed brassy yellow colour I didn't like, though I'd never told her. Which I'm glad about now.

The dog was scratching at the bedroom door. It was hungry or it wanted to go outside or it wanted to play. That dog and wanting were the same thing.

I couldn't think of anything I wanted. For a moment, that frightened me so much I felt dizzy, although I was lying down. I did not want anything. I wondered if wanting something, *anything*, was a reason not to die.

More scratching. I imagined Carrie's face if the dog shat himself all over the kitchen floor. If I didn't answer the telephone, Barry would panic and they would rush over here. Carrie would have her big crocodile tears all ready, and they would throw open the door, and there would be the dog looking ashamed and sitting in the middle of his dump.

That was one stupid dog.

I thought about getting up, but instead looked at the photo of Elsa with Barry as a baby in the plastic pool on the lawn. In those days Elsa had her natural pale silver hair and she was as thin and sinuous as the hose filling the pool with water. She could have been a gymnast, people used to say. She moved through the air in a way that was different from other people. Any moment, you'd expect her to fly, because whatever held things to the earth didn't seem to work on her. Like those Romanian girls in the Olympic Games. She could have been one of those.

She was too skinny, the doctors said, at the end. Just too skinny. She had to eat more, or whatever was eating her from the inside would win. It was like a race. I sat by the bed and watched it, and I saw her losing. When I asked the doctors its name, they shook their heads like idiots. I told them you need to know the name of your enemy. How can you fight a shadow? They looked at me queerly and muttered about viruses from Africa, a new strain of flu from Sardinia, and infectious diseases from places I had never heard of, but they didn't know what was taking Elsa. Every day, there was less and less of her. Just before she died, she was no more than a skeleton under the quilt, and only her eyes moved. There was something in them that scared me, something wild and angry and struggling to be free, like a caged animal. I was holding her bone-thin fingers and she pushed my hand away, one of her nails drawing blood. That was the last thing she did.

I opened the bedroom door and the dog backed away and looked at the fly wire screen of the porch like an actress from an old silent movie. Those big drama queen eyes reminded me of Carrie, which was bad news for the dog.

The Chinese takeaway container from last night was still on the laminate bench, bean shoots stuck to the rim. Barry had eaten most of it while he was trying to talk me into eating but he was an oaf, which Elsa had said fondly. *Baz, my little oaf.* He'd left smears of slimy bean shoots and noodles over the bench.

I wasn't hungry, which was good since I couldn't eat. Something in my throat had shut off when Elsa died and nothing could get through except fluid. I could chew food in my mouth but then I would spit it out.

I thought about throwing out the takeaway container or maybe walking the dog but both of those things were not the right things. They weren't reasons, and I didn't understand why I should do them. They didn't matter. Not in this world.

It's weird how you can take a single person away, and you're in a different place. I'd said to Barry, "It's like I'm in an alien world," but he never watched science fiction and didn't know what I meant, so I said, "Just take the colour red away and imagine what the world would be like" and he said, "Well, what about the traffic lights, there'd be a few accidents Dad." He thought that was pretty funny. Like I said, he was an oaf. He was big and strong and white-haired and in another time he would have made a living swinging an axe or shoeing horses with a single hand, but he was slow in the head.

Then I noticed the scrap of newspaper under one of the takeaway containers.

I remembered Barry's expression when he saw the ad on the kitchen bench last night. You hear people say 'his jaw dropped' but it never does, not really, except this once. Barry's face – it was as close as a man could get to dropping his jaw.

He'd said, "That's a prostitute, Dad."

He couldn't find words, maybe he couldn't find the right thoughts, for what he felt just then.

I told him, "No. She's no whore."

And he said, "Mum's just been gone for three weeks and—"

"You just read the ad. Maggie May is what she says she is."

I should have been embarrassed. Maybe a part of me was. Mainly I felt nothing, though. I didn't care what he thought.

"A hugger? What the hell is a hugger?" said Barry.

"She hugs people, just like the ad says. She hugs people for a living."

He looked revolted, which he hadn't when he thought Maggie May was just a whore. He held the scrap of paper by the corner like it had snot on it, went to the bin and dropped it in.

"Dad," he said, "you're being stooged."

Like he'd know, the biggest stooge on the plan-

et. I didn't say anything.

"Have you…have you been to see her?" he said, his voice weird and scared.

"Nope. I rang, but she was booked out."

He let the air out of his mouth like he had gas on his brain. "Well, thank god. Thank god for that," he said.

That was Carrie talking. Barry had never thanked god for anything until he met Carrie.

"There's prostitutes, they look for lonely men." He made a funny sucking sound, like his tongue was too big for his mouth. Barry had never been good with words. He'd tell Carrie, and she'd have the words worked out, and she'd come and warn me about women 'like that', and how I would end up robbed and bashed and dead maybe.

"Dad," Barry said. "Dad. Don't do anything stupid. I know things are bad now but they'll get better."

When I didn't say anything, he picked up the dog and tried to put it on my lap. It squirmed like it had worms and leapt off as soon as he released it.

I guess that was Barry's way of saying that if I needed to hug anything, there was always the dog. The dog was smarter than Barry. It was right to be scared. When you're a dog, you don't want the man who resents you to be in charge of the dog food.

"Barry, sometimes things don't get better. They just get worse."

That was a dumb thing to say to Barry. He screwed up his forehead like he was in pain and finished the Chinese food.

"I'll ring you tomorrow," he mumbled.

"You don't have to."

I wanted to say *I don't want you to* but there must have been something left in me, a piece that Elsa hadn't taken with her. So I just nodded when he shut the porch door behind him, took the newspaper ad out of the bin, and put it back on the kitchen bench.

Barry usually rang about midday. When he didn't, I knew it meant he was waiting to pick up Carrie from the insurance company where she worked and they would drop over for a visit. I guess the 'prostitute' ad had given Carrie a bit of a scare. *Maybe the old fool would sign the house over to the woman*, she'd be thinking. *Time for a heart to heart with Dad about the facts of life.*

So now I had a reason. It was enough to get me dressed and let the dog out to dig up Elsa's spring bulbs in the back yard.

I straightened the creases out of the newspaper ad. *Maggie May's Hugzzz*, it read, though *Hugzzz* was smeared a bit with sweet and sour sauce and hard to read. Below the heading there was a stick figure sketch of two people lying like spoons in a four poster bed. It was a pretty stupid logo, with lots of *zzzs* floating around the heads of the people.

The end of loneliness is only a hug away was written in curly type underneath the picture. It reminded me of an ad for nappy rash.

I rang the number and Maggie May answered straight away.

She had the voice of a whisky drinker.

"Oh yeah. You rang yesterday," she said in a slow, lazy way. I was pretty sure she'd been sleeping.

"You were booked out," I reminded her.

"Yeah," she laughed, a slow, thick sound that made me think of treacle. "Business is booming. Well, okay. I've had a cancellation. Can you make it in an hour?"

"That sounds fine," I said.

"And no funny stuff, okay. This isn't a parlour or anything. Some guys get a bit confused about the service."

"I'm not confused," I assured her.

"Yeah, well, see you in an hour." She sounded bored, and hung up before I could say anything.

When I got back to the house after the appointment with Maggie May, Barry and Carrie were waiting for me in the kitchen. I noticed that Carrie had cleaned up the bench and thrown out the takeaway container. The dog was sitting at her feet, thumping his tail against the wooden floor with such brainless force it must have hurt.

"He likes you more than he likes me," I said, taking off my coat and hanging it on the hook of the back door.

"That's your good coat," said Barry. "You wore it to the funeral."

"Your navy coat? Did you visit the cemetery?" Carrie said in a thin voice.

"Nope," I said. "I visited Maggie May."

Barry and Carrie and the dog exchanged glances.

"It's not a Navy coat." I pointed to the emblem on the front pocket. It was a fancy crest with Nordica Fjord Ferry Service stitched under the symbol of a mermaid. "I was just a ferry man."

Carrie liked to tell people I had been in the Norwegian navy, and when I corrected her, when I said, "I was just a ferry man," she'd wink and laugh and say, "Oh, Dad, don't be so modest!"

"Well, you certainly dressed up for her. Looks like you even changed your shirt," Carrie said. "You know, Dad, there are women who prey on vulnerable men. Lonely men. They are extremely dangerous." She frowned like a news reporter when she said 'extremely', and even with her fluffy curls and big doll eyes it made her face look hard and square, like a brick.

"Nothing dangerous about Maggie May." I looked at the dog as if I was daring it to contradict me, and it ducked its head behind Carrie's leg.

"Well, you do look rested, Dad. Don't you think, Carrie? And it's good you've changed your clothes. That's a good sign." Barry said that like a question and looked at Carrie for confirmation. "And – it was just a hug?"

"Yep." I looked around the kitchen. "Just a hug. And I slept like a baby. Did you bring any of that soup?"

"I think you look feverish," said Carrie. "You didn't drink anything there, did you? And you're absolutely certain nothing happened except a hug?"

I took out my wallet and dumped it on the bench. "A hundred dollar hug. She didn't steal a penny more. We lie down on a big four poster bed, and she gives you a special dressing gown, so the bed doesn't get dirty. Then she puts her arms around you and sort of whispers things, senseless lullaby sort of things. And I feel better than I have since…well, for quite a while."

Barry looked ill. "It's weird. And people pay for that?"

"You know it's a scam, Dad. I mean, it's ridiculous. Who ever heard of a woman selling hugs. And a hundred dollars is a bit steep." Carrie rapidly scanned my wallet, making sure the credit cards were in place. "She could be building up to something. I think you should count yourself lucky and call it quits."

"Oh, there's a waiting list. She's always booked out," I said. I felt almost cheerful.

Carrie shook her head. "There's a lot of sad people out there. So I guess that's it then. You won't be going again, if she's booked out."

"Looks like," I said distractedly. "Is there any food in the house?"

"I'll nip out and get some takeaway," Barry said.

"That would be nice, Baz," Carrie said. "Good to see you've got your appetite back, Dad." She didn't sound that happy about it, though.

Barry slammed the fly wire door behind him so hard it shuddered. He never did know his own strength. Broke things all the time.

"Not Chinese," I called after him.

Carrie was still checking me out suspiciously. "You never know what you can pick up in those places, all those strange men using her services."

I smiled neutrally. The dog was pressing itself against Carrie's leg as if it would never willingly be parted from her. That's the thing about dogs, they have a sixth sense for people who know what can openers are for and understand that dogs are clock watchers.

Carrie saw me looking at the dog. "Is it time for Rufus's walk?"

I can hear things that other people can't, but I never knew the dog's name was Rufus. A stupid human name, not a dog name. Probably that's why I forgot it and called the dog Dog.

"Could be hungry." It was a safe guess; I couldn't remember feeding him.

I opened the cupboard with the dog food and the dog stiffened, quivering under Carrie's hand.

"Oh god!" Carrie said, and I thought maybe she'd counted the cans of dog food and realised it was the pretty much the same number she'd brought round with the dog. I'm not a cruel man, but the thing in me that made me feel for others had gone with Elsa. Maybe now Carrie would realise I wasn't fit to care for anything any more and take the dog away.

I said, "You should take the dog back," but she wasn't listening. She had her hand over her mouth in one of those movie gestures she'd

picked up. I could always tell, because they didn't fit with the rest of her.

Elsa had once said Carrie was like the servant girl who'd stolen Madame de Pompadour's clothes. I didn't know who Madame de Pompadour was but it sounded right. So now I saw Carrie with her stolen words, her stolen expressions, her stolen gestures, all stitched on badly and not fitting quite right. But Barry never noticed such things. And Elsa was glad that Barry had found a woman, even a woman made of stolen parts.

"What on earth are those scratches?" Carrie said.

I looked back at my hand on the cupboard door and saw, where the shirt had slid up my arm, four long scratches, scabbed over and inflamed. I wonder why I hadn't felt them. They should have hurt. I couldn't remember where they'd come from.

"They're *infected*," Carrie said triumphantly. "She must have scratched you!"

I thought about that. It was hard to remember some details, though other things were as clear as my photos.

Maggie May and I lay on the four poster bed. It was very old and big and the wood of the carved pillars was so dark it was almost black. The material which hung from the frame above was thick, like upholstery on expensive couches, and I could see it was made up of tiny stitches. So many tiny stitches in faded thread, it made you think of dozens of tiny fingers working their tiny needles. I knew the curtains must have been very old and had taken many, many years to make. Elsa knew her history. She would have known about the pictures these tiny stitches made. She would have been lost in wonder. I saw unicorns made of tiny stitches, and women with strange pointed hats, like witches' hats, but with flowing veils. The women were thin as twigs and their backs were arched like bows, and the tiny stitches of their perfect faces glowed with the knowledge of their beauty. There were stitched trees. Fig trees, and others I didn't recognise. The unicorns had beards, which I didn't like, and they looked at the thin women as if they wanted to eat them.

"At least put some antiseptic on it," Carrie said. She looked at the scratches with a disgusted expression.

"It could have been the cat," I said at last. I could vaguely remember the cat lying on the bed with us. I lay on my side as Maggie May had instructed, and she was curled around my back; we were just like the two spoons in the newspaper ad. Then a cat had jumped on the bed, a big cat, bigger than the dog called Rufus, and he had snuggled in front of me. His purrs vibrated against my body like an engine. I couldn't remember him scratching me. He moved as quietly as a cloud across the sky, moulding himself into the crevices of my body. I didn't feel anything except the warmth of his fur and the deep thrum of his purr. Then Maggie May began her song, and I slept.

"She had a cat in the bed? You know the diseases they carry?" Carrie went into the bathroom and started looking through the cupboards. They were full of all the medicines Elsa had to take, bottles and ampoules and syringes. Carrie was annoyed and started throwing the medications into the bin. When the bin was full, I could hear her dumping them straight into the basin, muttering loud enough for me to hear because Barry wasn't there and it didn't matter. I'd heard all the words before anyway, when she just spoke them in her head.

"Your father's infected. He was clawed by a cat in that woman's house."

I hadn't heard Barry return; the noise Carrie was making throwing the medicines around was rattling around in my head like a bad memory.

"Oh, gee, Dad!" Barry dumped the takeaway food on the bench and grabbed my wrist in his huge paw. "Those are some scratches! How big was this cat, anyway?"

"Uggh! I think this is antiseptic," said Carrie. "It looks a thousand years old, but it's better than nothing."

She thrust the old, dusty bottle at Barry. "Use a napkin from the takeaway. It's probably cleaner than anything else in the house."

Her expression said: Well, I'm not touching the old geezer. He got himself into this mess.

Barry dabbed the stuff in the bottle on my hand. The scratches did look red, but they didn't hurt. I guess that meant they would be okay. They were red because they were meant to be red, like a tattoo reminding me of something. I

could hear the cat purring. I could feel Maggie May's breath against the back of my neck.

I promised Barry I would go to the clinic tomorrow, and I promised Carrie I would ring if the hand started to hurt. At last they left.

The food Barry left on the bench was Chinese. But I ate it anyway.

I had an appointment with Maggie May the next day. I'd talked her into it. I guess she saw something in me that made her curious. Or maybe she just felt sorry for me. I'd told her about Elsa. She said she'd fit me in during her lunch hour.

There were some promotional leaflets on a table in the front hall of her house, and I put one of them in my pocket. The front of the leaflet showed Maggie May flung across her bed, her throat bent back and her black hair trailing to the floor. The cat was sprawled across her chest, staring directly into the camera with world-weary, shuttered eyes. His pointed ears look enormous on the narrow, triangular face. He reminded me of the forest cats of Norway.

"I wanted the photo to look like Fuseli's 'Nightmare', but we couldn't get a horse into the house," Maggie May said. When I didn't react she added, "You don't know that painting?"

I didn't know anything about art, so I said, "You'd be crazy to bring a horse into the house."

"Yeah. That's what the photographer said."

I cut out Maggie's photo and removed the one of Barry from a silver frame on the dresser. It was a pretty awful photo of him in school uniform. The uniform was too small but it was the largest size they made for junior grades. He looked like an oak tree forced into a sapling trunk. I put Maggie May's photo in the frame instead.

Maggie May was large in the way that Turkish women are large; I've heard men call them lush but I've always liked whip thin women who looked like they could be whisked away by breezes and ride the winds. Still, I looked at the photo of Maggie May, and it was like looking at earth – solid, and dark, and rich. In Norway, where I was born, women would praise her for her child-bearing hips and the strength of her back; she could easily haul buckets of water from the well.

She had slanted eyes lined with sooty makeup and they hinted at untold stories. She had secrets too. Like the earth she could enfold you, and she knew the way of it. They put Elsa in the earth when she died, though she should have been given to the sea. But the embrace of Maggie May's earth was growth, not decay.

I hesitated before I put the photo on the bedside table, close enough for me to reach out and touch from the bed. Only a single photo had ever stood on that table. It was of Elsa, no more than a girl of twenty, a girl on a carousel. An old black and white shot, it was taken at the Bergen Fair, I think, just before we left Norway.

Elsa was climbing up on one of those fancy horses carved by old craftsmen who knew their trade. The horses had proud wooden manes which crested like waves and the way she held onto the pole you thought she was part of the carousel, a mermaid riding the seas. You couldn't tell where Elsa ended and the horse began. The horse's tail, black painted wood as shiny as oil, looked like it belonged to Elsa. When Barry was little she told him it was really her tail, a black fancy tail she hid under her dress so people wouldn't stare. Barry had started to cry, and Elsa had to move the photo into the bedroom so it wouldn't scare him.

That was my favourite photo of Elsa. Everyone else on that carousel looked like lumps of clay, and she looked like she had electricity running through her.

I put the photo of Maggie May next to Elsa's. For a moment it felt like a betrayal, but then I remembered the line of blood Elsa had drawn on my hand when she died, and I left both photos there.

The next morning I woke up and had breakfast straight away. It was leftovers from last night's Chinese, and it wasn't until I finished that I realised the morning had been different. I couldn't decide how exactly. I just knew it was different.

I let the dog out, opened up three cans of dog food and left them out on the porch.

Maybe that would make up for the days I hadn't fed it. It scoffed down all three cans, but it still kept well away from me.

The scratches on my hand were red, the skin

around them puffed and inflamed. They didn't hurt, though I could feel the blood pulse beneath the skin. And I thought of Maggie May.

She looked sleepy when she opened the front door. Her house was so overgrown with creepers you couldn't see what it was made of. It was like a woodland cave, all lush and green, drooping with flowers. Wisteria poked through the gap in the door and climbed the hallway ceiling. Everything grew wild and lush around Maggie May.

Her last customer was putting on his coat when she opened the door. He avoided my eye, nervously straightened his suit, and with a quick smile at Maggie dashed out of the house.

The dressing gown I put on was still warm from his body. I could smell aftershave on it. Elsa would have known for sure, but I thought it was an expensive one.

"I'm so tired, I feel I could sleep forever," Maggie said, leading me into the bedroom. She smiled indolently, making me think of Turkish harems again.

I curled up on the bed, my body tight and thrumming.

"You should relax," she breathed at my back. "I've got you, and I won't let go."

She curled her body around mine, fitting herself against every curve and niche of my back and legs. I was cradled in earth. I could feel the hum of the life-giving soil, the urgency of tiny seeds yearning to grow.

"Are you life itself, Maggie May?" I asked.

"Sure," she laughed. "For a hundred bucks, I'm anything you want me to be."

The bed sank a little. I opened my eyes a little and saw the triangular face of the cat inches from mine. He was as big as a lynx, and had tufted ears. His eyes were wise as the eyes of whales are wise, but they had an indifference in them that reminded me of carvings of the old Norse gods, the eyes of beings indifferent to the frailty of people.

"Does your cat have a name?" I asked, hesitating. For some reason I knew it was an impertinent question.

"Of course," she said. But she wouldn't tell me what it was.

When I arrived back home Barry and Carrie were waiting for me.

"Rufus escaped into the street and the dog pound phoned me," Carrie said. Her look was cold, but I could see outrage just under the surface of her skin.

"I never wanted the dog."

Barry looked hurt. "Dad, you need the company. Honestly, the doc said it would be good for you."

Carrie had turned her face away, as if she couldn't bear to look at me.

"Rufus gives you a reason to get up in the morning." Her voice was sharper than usual, and Barry looked at her unhappily.

"He's not a good enough reason." I slammed the door behind me, something I usually never do.

"Dad, if you went for a walk, you should've taken the dog. And you'd meet people. Other people with dogs." Barry looked lost. I knew he was repeating something that Carrie had drilled into him, something he didn't quite understand.

"I met someone," I said. "I met Maggie May."

Carrie snorted. "Well, at this rate you'll be mortgaging the house to pay for her. I think you'd better talk some sense to your father Barry."

Barry jerked as if she'd walloped him. Nobody had ever asked him to talk sense before. He looked at Carrie as if he was waiting for a cue card.

Now her pretty doll face had hardened into the thing it would become in middle age.

She looked at me directly, not bothering to hide the contempt in her eyes.

"You haven't looked after yourself. Look at your hand. It's worse than ever. And your face is flushed. You didn't go to the clinic. You know the infection is spreading."

Barry looked panicked and beseeching at the same time. "Dad, you promised. You said you'd go to the doctor's."

I shrugged.

Carrie took her handbag from the bench and stood up.

"One day, Barry, you're going to have to ask yourself if your father is competent to take care of himself."

She walked out the door, Barry staring after

her as if he'd been clobbered.

"Listen Dad, I'm coming tomorrow and taking you to the docs. You hear that? So you stay put, and wait for me. I'll come get you tomorrow."

He raced after Carrie, who was marching straight through the bluebells that were coming up in the lawn.

I looked down at the dog, who had tried to follow them but had been thwarted by the screen door slamming into its nose. Now it sat shivering in the corner.

I opened a can of dog food and slammed it down in front of him. It looked pathetically grateful. I sighed, thought about it for a moment, and then patted his head.

I could tell he didn't like it. Maybe he thought I was going to hit him. Or maybe he could smell the cat with no name on my fingers.

I got up early to go to Maggie May's the next morning. With the promise of an additional $50, she'd reluctantly agreed to an early appointment.

"I'll probably just fall asleep on you," she'd warned, shrugging.

I looked for a clean shirt and couldn't find one. There was the only the Wedding Shirt left hanging in the closet. It had peaked collars and embroidery on the pocket, and Carrie had insisted that I wear it to their wedding five years ago. It was made by some famous designer who wore dark sunglasses indoors and I felt like Liberace when I wore it.

I put it on anyway. The jacket would hide most of it, and I bent down the collar so it didn't look so much like a preacher's shirt. The fit around my wrist was pretty tight, though. The inflammation around the scratches had formed high, puffed ridges during the night. It looked pretty bad, but it still didn't hurt. I wondered for a moment whether I should see a doctor. I was feeling feverish too, hotter than usual, but it was a nervy, energising heat. I didn't feel sick, and the last thing I wanted was for a doctor to whack me in a hospital.

I found an old packet of Corn Flakes in the bottom of the laundry cupboard and ate the whole lot dry. I couldn't remember feeling so hungry. I'd drop into the supermarket after Maggie's. Maybe do a load of washing when I got home.

I left the dog inside this time, with two cans of Chow dumped in his bowl.

There was a uniformed cop leaving Maggie May's when I pushed through the garden gate. He was young, about Barry's age, and gave me a friendly nod as he passed.

Maggie was waiting at the door.

"I thought I was your earliest customer," I said in a joking voice, but I hadn't liked seeing the copper. "Or is he your boyfriend or something?"

She raised her eyebrows. They were thick and black, and swept up her forehead like swan's wings. "Some old woman complained to the cops about me. Her old man spent all their pension here, and now she's accusing me of making him sick. Said I gave him 'drugs of addiction', can you believe that? He's too weak to leave his bed, she says, unless it's to come here. Poor old bugger. What a hell of a life."

"So what did the copper say?" I asked.

She slow-smiled, a lazy lift at the corners of her mouth. I don't know why, but that smile caught you every time, like a bee trapped in a honey pot.

"He said I was worth every cent."

There was a note from Barry on the kitchen bench when I got back from the supermarket. He still wrote like a ten year old kid. "Came to take you to the Doc. From Barry."

I rang and left a message at their house. "Went to the clinic. Hand is fine. Feeling good. I'm thinking of going fishing with Smithy for a couple of days. Taking the dog. See you when I get back."

I checked my bank balance that night. Elsa's medications and treatment had taken a big chunk out of our savings, but I had enough to keep visiting Maggie May for a while longer before I'd have to call on the bank for a redraw on the mortgage. And there was always my old job at the factory waiting for me if I wanted it.

I'd talked Maggie May into giving me a regular early morning session. It was going to cost me $150. She said that she was only doing it because the cat liked me.

I cleaned the house, even scrubbing the vene-

tian blinds, just for something to do until I exhausted myself enough to fall asleep. I bandaged my hand and put a rubber glove on it, an extra-large size that I'd bought at the supermarket.

I didn't want to look at those scratches. They'd started to pus up at the edges, and the skin was the colour of raw meat. They still didn't hurt though, so it was easy to ignore them.

It was late by the time I'd finished the cleaning, but I still had enough energy to clean the damn place all over again.

Instead I went to Elsa's side of the closet, which I hadn't opened since she'd died. I pushed my face into the clothes hanging there and I breathed her in. She was wind and ice and the faint scent of arctic flowers which she called felshovm, and maybe my heart broke a little when I smelt her, but I cried because I still had a heart. I thought she had taken that with her when she died, but she hadn't. She'd left that piece of me behind.

The dog trotted over to the bedroom door and was staring at me with its head cocked. Maybe it thought I couldn't cry. Maybe it thought I didn't have a heart anymore. Maybe that's what had scared him.

I sat on the bedroom floor and let the breeze from the window waft through Elsa's dresses, so they shivered like live things. The dog came and sat next to me and put its head on my knee.

I remembered its name was Rufus.

I figured Barry and Carrie would give me a least a week before they came snooping around, checking to see if I was back from my fishing trip.

I visited Maggie May every morning, though I could see she wasn't happy about it.

"I'm losing my beauty sleep 'cause of you, Jasper," she said. I don't know why she called me Jasper, but she did. And it was true, in a funny way, about the beauty sleep. Maybe she was working too hard, if you can call hugging people work, but she'd lost a bit of weight, and I could see new lines at the corner of her eyes. The delicate pink bloom of her skin had faded too, like material that had been washed too often.

She talked about moving to California. She'd like to sit by a pool and drink cocktails with little umbrellas in them. She'd make a fortune in California, she said, but there'd be quarantine problems with the cat. And the flight. It exhausted her just thinking about it.

I never took off the rubber glove when I was with her. Maggie May never mentioned it, but the cat sniffed at it a couple of times. It didn't smell bad. It didn't smell of anything much, unless snow has a smell.

Whenever there was any wind at all, I flung open all the bedroom windows and watched the bits of silk and cotton in the wardrobe catch the breeze and move, as if Elsa were dancing. Once there was a real gust, and one of the dresses slipped off its hanger and twisted into the room, swirling high and wild and catching on the light fitting before it went limp.

The dog whimpered and scampered out of the room with his tail squeezed to his belly.

I laughed out loud, and jumped to pull the dress down. I hadn't jumped that high in years, and waited for my knees to groan when I landed. But they didn't. Whatever fever burnt in me, it numbed the aches of age.

My laughter had drowned out the sound of the car pulling up, but I heard the squeal of the front gate being opened.

I looked out the window like a guilty kid, and saw the cat sitting on the ledge.

It was huge. In Maggie May's house, which was stuffed full of big pieces of antique furniture, the sort of stuff you wouldn't fit in a family home these days, he looked big. But sitting on the flimsy aluminium window ledge, he seemed the size of a puma. In the sunlight he was a much lighter grey, almost silver. His gold eyes were like mirrors. He was watching the dress I still held in my hands, and now and again his ears would twitch, as if he noticed movement there.

"Hey, what are you doing here, fella?" I moved toward the window sill just as I heard Carrie's voice, shrill with anger. "I'd say the whole fishing trip story was crap. Honestly, serve him right if we left him to rot here, but there's the dog and—Oh! And will you look at that! He's left all the windows open!"

"Dad?" That was Barry, slamming open the porch door.

I rushed into the kitchen before he went looking for me in the bedroom.

He looked shocked, his mouth open but nothing coming out. Then he noticed the rubber glove on my hand. I hadn't paid much mind to it lately, but following Barry's stare, I looked down and guessed it looked about the size of baseball glove.

"What the…" Carrie peered over Barry's shoulder, barged over to me, and ripped off the rubber glove. I was too surprised to push her away, and then seeing my wrist through the twisted bandages, seeing the bruised greenish skin, knocked the breath out of me.

"That's gangrene," Carrie said in a low, vicious voice. She grabbed my arm and waved it at Barry. "Did you hear me, Baz? I said *gangrene*. You can die from that, or they chop your arm off."

Barry waved his hands helplessly and moaned. "Dad? Dad? You said you went to the clinic. You said you had it all fixed—"

I elbowed Carrie out of the way and ran. Didn't know I could still run that fast. Carrie's voice chased after me. "Jesus, Baz! Catch him, he's got dementia or something, for Christ's sake, go after him."

I looked over my shoulder and saw Barry lumbering after me, already puffing. I must have been going pretty fast. Maybe fast enough for a heart attack. But my legs didn't stop, and my breath was steady, like I'd been running all my life.

I didn't see the cat padding along beside me until I'd reached Maggie May's cottage. It looked just like a house from a story book, a house hidden in a hill. Hansel and Gretel? I couldn't remember. It was the sort of thing Elsa would have known. You couldn't see any of the house for the plants, except for the chimney. I don't know why I'd never noticed the chimney before. I reached for my glasses, then realised I'd left them at home. Maybe that's why everything looked so sharp it hurt. I blinked away tears.

The cat butted his head against my leg, urging me up the path.

"You gave me gangrene, and it'll kill me, Carrie says. Now why would you do that, eh? I thought you liked me."

His eyes were enormous, like polished discs of gold.

I walked up the path and the cat followed. I looked back at him.

"Did you see me run, though? Phew. Never thought I still had it in me."

The front door was open a little.

There was a metal plate on the door I hadn't noticed before either. It was engraved in another language, Latin I guess. Some noble saying, that was the fashion when this place would have been built. The metal was so shiny I could see my reflection in it. It was me, but different. Another me, the ferry man. The man I had been in Norway.

My eyes teared up again and I automatically reached for the glasses that weren't there.

The cat got tired of waiting and went into the house. He swayed his hindquarters like a stalking panther, and swished his tail. I followed him into Maggie May's bedroom.

She was on the bed in her familiar work dressing gown, lying on her side like she always did. She was alone though. There was a dent in the bed which was usually filled by another body.

It was weird seeing her like that, and I looked away, embarrassed. The cat leapt up next to her, nudging her hand. Maggie May didn't move.

"Jasper," she breathed. So soft, her voice was too light for the air to carry. But I heard her. I went and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Well, look at you, handsome! Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of us all…" It took all her strength to say that. She closed her eyes. I thought she'd fallen asleep. Her hand was curled under her chin. It was so thin. I hadn't noticed how thin she had become. She reminded me of Elsa.

With my good arm I lightly touched the dressing gown, and it sank under my fingers, just like a balloon leaking air, until it outlined her skeletal form.

Maggie May opened her eyes again. Her sleepy, Turkish eyes. They hadn't changed. I didn't look at the rest of her face. She wouldn't have wanted me too.

"Hey Jasper. You're quite a lady killer." She made a sound which once may have been a laugh. "A big, hungry boy. Too greedy for me."

Her look shifted to my hand – the bad hand, with the bandages trailing from it. It was more black than green in this light, and the scratches

weren't red any more. They were black, and dark pus was oozing from them.

Before I could move the cat lashed out a paw and ripped through the blackened flesh. I gasped with horror as the skin tore open, and yellow fluid flooded the bedspread. It didn't hurt though. And there was a sudden smell of snow in the air.

The skin had opened up like a banana peel. Vomit rose in my throat but I swallowed a breath of icy air instead. The cat batted at the flaps of flesh, and I saw what lay underneath. Hair, fur, something. Whatever it was, it wasn't meat, it wasn't bone. I grabbed hold of the black flesh and tore it away like soggy packaging.

It was the fetlock and hoof of a foal. Pale haired, the same silver shade as the cat. A perfect tiny hoof lay where my fingers had been. There was blood and shreds of rotted flesh on the hoof, but the cat meticulously licked them away. The hoof shone like pearl.

"You tricked me, Ferry Man. You'd think I'd be onto you, after all these years in the business… but I never knew." She sighed and closed her eyes and I knew she wouldn't open them again.

The cat followed me home. I hid the lower part of my left arm in the pocket of my jacket. It liked the warmth, the darkness. It liked to hide the pearly glow of its tiny hoof until just the right moment.

Halfway home I burst into a run; I ran as the young ferry man had run and I felt icy wind in my hair. Maybe I ran as fast as a horse, maybe I galloped.

Somewhere in the world there was a fjord. It froze to ice in winter, but in summer a ferry chugged through it, the decks drenched with icy water. A creature lived in that fjord. She sang with the voice of tumbling waters, and none who heard her could resist her call. When her time came and she joined with the foam of the fjord, one of her daughters would take her place.

Once a ferry man had stolen a daughter. He had taken her far away from the place of ice and snow, taken her far from her home, where dark spruce glowed green under the peculiar lights of that sky.

"You'll like it there," I told the cat. "There's fish in the fjord, so stupid they leap into your mouth to be eaten."

The cat blinked.

"There's always a girl who makes her home under the fjord. A girl fairer than snow, with lips as red as elderberries and eyes like the dark side of the moon. She's quicker than a fish and dares the wind to catch her. She will be no man's wife, but the ferry man knows the secret desire of her icy heart."

I twitched the tiny pearl hoof in my pocket and the cat batted at it playfully.

There's no girl alive who can resist a sweet pony, as the ferry man knows.

Pandora Hope has worked as a copywriter, science writer, designer, editor and runologist while moonlighting as a volva (a Scandinavian witch). Her passion for the lesser known treasures of Norse mythology inspired her to write her first short story, 'The Ferry Man', and the novel she is currently working on. She and her partner (not a Viking) live in Australia and are custodians of what may well be Melbourne's only Norwegian Forest Cat. Pandora's website is www.writersark.net, and she can also be contacted at www.facebook.com/PandoraHopeWriter.

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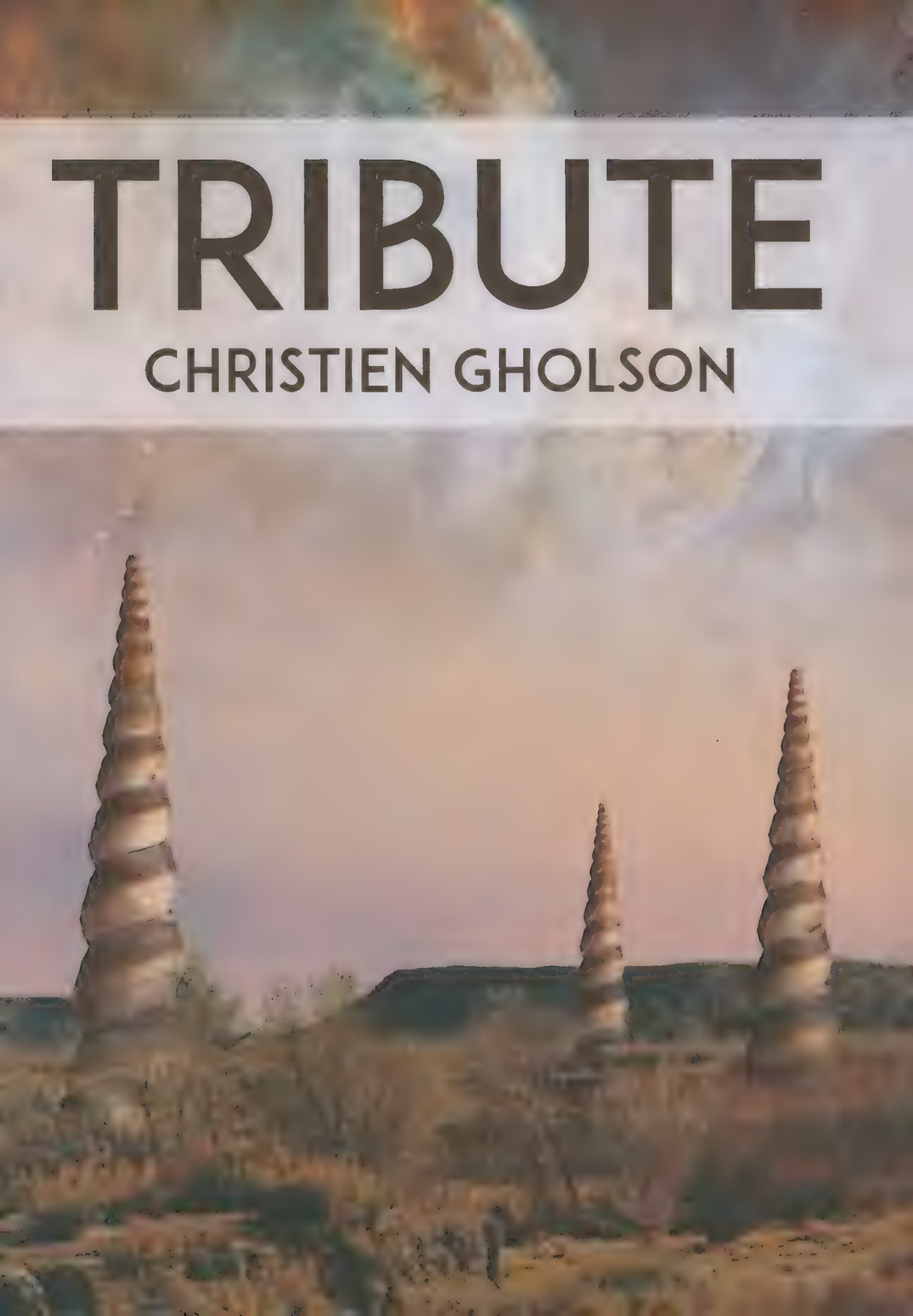

1 **MOTHER TOLD ME** that there is always a beginning before the one we believe came first. She said that before we were spinners of sun and dust, we were weavers of starlight and dust. Before that, we wove the black space between stars. How that is possible, I don't know. She said she sometimes had quick flashes of memory from that time: when light was the same as song; and song a tunnel of gas creating space out of nothing…

None of it ever made any sense to me. How could it? This high cliff overlooking an endless plain is my beginning place. I was born *here.* Every day of my life I have looked down at the hundreds of journey shells scattered among the burrow brush: spiral towers of cartilage, hard as stone; unmoving, unmovable; beaten by the constant flying dust. What remains of my kin are inside those shells, dreaming their thousand year transformation. I cry out to them in my mind,

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

but they do not answer. Can they hear me? I never knew any of them. Mother was the only one of my kind I ever knew. And she is gone.

At night, while the shadow lizards move among the rocks up here, scuttling crack to crack, I study the stars and try to imagine beginnings inside beginnings inside beginnings. It is easy to say but impossible to conjure in the mind. Mother said we came floating out of the night, onto this plain. Maybe the knowledge of our true beginnings comes after I dream my new body into being inside my journey shell.

Every morning I open the serrated edge of my mantle to the sun, swing it in an arc the way Mother showed me, gather in the flying dust, and mix it with my blood. I spin and I spin, but nothing ever comes of it. Is the heat of the sun meant to bake the dust and blood together, transform my outer flesh into shell? I don't know. Nothing is known beyond her insistence that I always angle my mantle halfway between the horizon and the sun. "Always keep to the center between the two," Mother said, over and over. I know now that she kept repeating the same things in her last year because she knew she would not be able to finish her teaching.

But there is so much I do not remember.

"Gather the sun and dust," she said. "Turn… and the shell twists itself," she said. She also said: "We are these beings and we are not these beings. We are our mantles, glistening with blood in the sun, drawing in dust, but the form keeps changing, always changing…"

What form my kind is destined to take after our dream is done inside the shell, I don't know.

When she died, her great body slumped over the shell that was only half-completed around her, mantle stretched out in the dust. Her body was too great for me to move and so I stood vigil on this cliff for days, weeks; forced to watch her body rot. It didn't take long for the scoryax to find her. At first, they came out of the sky in twos and threes, easy to chase off. But entire flocks followed and I couldn't keep them off her.

How I hated them, still hate them…

2 **THE COUNCIL SAYS** that a catastrophe of this magnitude has never happened and so our response has no precedent. Like everyone else in this city, they are woefully ignorant of our history. I have been First Historian at the Keunhem Archives for over forty years – poring through the stacks, compiling briefs, making connections – so I have a very different perspective on things. As far as I can tell from the records this city is more than eighty thousand years old. Catastrophes have come and gone, come and gone. There is a cycle to everything. I take the long view.

This time, they say it was a beast, a great beast. Herders on the plain west of the city saw it emerge from a vortex of sun and dust (whatever that means). The beast made its way into the city and began rampaging through the streets, tearing people apart, smashing windows, doors, roaring like a sand storm. I was not in the city when it happened – I was at a retreat on Mount Uron in the Ephne Mountains – so I cannot comment on the accuracy of the reports. One thing cannot be denied: something terrible happened. I have seen the damage with my own eyes, heard the cries of those that lost loved ones.

This disaster could not have come at a worse time. The chancellor has always been weak, barely able to control his rival Nes Dānem – but now there is no stopping him. Dānem and his cousins on the council have turned the catastrophe in their favor, claiming the beast was an incarnation of Kaayem, the destroyer, the thousand armed god who is destined to eat the world at the end of days. They have pulled this Kaayem-god out of texts so ancient that even I have had trouble deciphering them.

Kaayem was supposedly worshipped during the first dark age of this city. Dānem and his kind now claim they are a part of a secret society, made up of certain ruling families, who have always sacrificed to this god. They have sacrificed to keep the city safe, they say. They have sacrificed for the greater good, they say. Ah, but now the story is that the worshippers have become too few in number and so cannot complete the amount of sacrifices needed each year to quell the god's thirst for blood. Thus, Kaayem was forced to manifest, gather the proper tribute that has long been his due.

I keep telling the chancellor that this is an old, old tale; that the fear reigning after a catastrophe

usually leads to repression, terror, lies. I talk and talk – to no avail.

Do I believe a beast actually rampaged through the western quadrant of the city? I have read things in the archives that are equally as incongruous, equally as absurd. In the third century of the Kores Era I found many reports of hundreds of thousands of horses stampeding across the eastern plains, from the Torrents to the Ephne Mountains. This happened long after horses were said to have died off. And after the stampede, no trace of the horses was ever seen again. In the second millennium of our own age there is a report of a rain of shadow lizards; lizard upon lizard falling from an empty sky, onto the roofs and streets of the city. And only last century, at the close of the period called Loura, also known by some scholars as the Age of True Sight, when scholarship and science reigned supreme, there were numerous reports of colored lights dancing in the sky to the north, dancing sometimes directly over the capital city, accompanied by the sound of distant voices, singing in a strange tongue. These examples are only a few of the many mysteries I have come across in my studies.

What to make of these strange accounts? They obviously cannot be corroborated, proved. What I find curious, though, is their frequency in the records. Their frequency is the only thing that has kept me from dismissing it all as the fancies of ancient, unenlightened scholarship; from a time when history was myth, flights of a wild imagination.

Still, despite our advances in science and true sight, I am willing to admit that there are many things in this world that the mind simply cannot fathom or explain. When encountering such mystery, I feel it's important to simply let the story sink into the mind and leave it at that. What's the point of judgment? Why jump to an immediate 'yes, I believe' or 'no, that's false'? It is like looking at the stars at night: we know *how* they exist – but *why*? Silence is the only answer sometimes.

Silence certainly helps to see the stars more clearly.

But my musings are from an older time. I have spent too long in these stacks, speaking with the dead. Out in the streets there is a frenzied desperation to find some solid explanation for the catastrophe. People want a cause, something to blame. They want protection from the chaos of the world.

There is no protection.

Beast or no beast, Dānem now has what he has always desired – a sure doorway to power. Can anyone else not see this? Sometimes I suspect that Dānem may have been responsible somehow for the catastrophe. He can't possibly believe in Kaayam, can he? Kaayam piety is only about power. Dānem has always wanted the city in his fist. Why? I have never understood people who crave power. Maybe there's something missing inside them, some hole they are seeking to fill. Does he think that if he has control of the city, he will eventually gain control over his own fear, maybe even over his own death? I have seen this sort of pattern before in the archives.

If Dānem succeeds in wresting control from the chancellor – and he will – these musings will be declared blasphemy. I have seen where Dānem's lies lead: swarms of young men, marching through the street late at night, punching the air with their fists, shouting Kaayem's name. I fear for all the lives to come, all the lives that will be wasted on the rack of fear, persecution, and blood sacrifice. It has happened before. It's all in these archives: reports, files, journals, court narratives. It is the story of the great wheel, turning, ever turning…

I know I cannot stop it. But I will still try. How can I not?

3 NOT LONG AFTER the scoryax picked Mother clean, the new creatures appeared. They came out of the south, out of the sun and dust, at dawn. That first time I was too fascinated to be scared, watching them cross the plain towards my cliff dwelling. There were three of them that first time; one large, two small. But even the large one was no bigger than the size I must have been was when I was born.

Was it an adult and two children of their kind? I do not know.

They entered a canyon to the west. I waited in the heat and glare, abandoning my daily attempt at turning around the center to gather sun and dust, desperate for another glimpse of the crea-

tures. The hours flew by as I tried to imagine what they were, what their purpose here was, and if they were working their way up through the canyons to my cliff top dwelling. Did they know I was here? If they approached me, what would I do? At sundown I sighted only one, the large one, heading back out onto the plain, and watched him disappear into the mirage of heat rippling off the valley floor. Two had been left behind. What were they doing right now?

There was fear. There was exhilaration.

At twilight, under the cover of shadows, I climbed down off the mesa, made my way into the canyon they had entered. It had been a long time since I'd ventured off the mesa (not since Mother had died – and so, in the dim light, I kept mistaking boulders and spikes of stone for her body). I found the two left behind curled against each other. They were strangely shaped, and small, so small, smaller than I had imagined; the size of shadow lizards straight out of the shell. And yet their eyes were like Mother's, like mine.

One of them made a sound. Nothing in my life had prepared me for that sound. A terror swept through me. And sorrow. I tried to speak with them. I asked who they were, why they were there, but when I did they both cried out. The pain waking off their cries was so overwhelming, I fled. Back up to the mesa. The seven moons swung back and forth across the horizon, stars appeared, and I did not know what to do.

Was this pain their language? It tore my nerves, bringing me back to the day Mother died. It was as if they were calling up Mother's death, drawing it out of the surrounding boulders, the burrow brush. What were they trying to say to me? Were they telling me in their own language the story of Mother's death? But they were not there. I was there.

I slept and dreamt of Mother. She was trying to speak to me, from out on the plain, shimmering in a mirage of heat. I moved across the desert floor as fast as I could, but the faster I moved, the faster she receded, always keeping the same distance away. What was she saying? Was she telling me the secret of how to create my journey shell? Eventually the sound changed, barely audible through the wind and dust, into the language of the tiny creatures speaking in their pain-tongue. I woke, went to the edge of the cliff.

"Stop!" I screamed. "You must stop!"

Who was I speaking to?

Had the creatures given me the dream? The next morning I went back into the canyon to plead with them to leave, to return to where they came from, that this was not the place for them; that their presence, their language, was interfering with my ability to remember how to make the journey shell.

They were dead.

Had they come here to die?

Later in the morning, the scoryax came. I could see them spinning above the canyon from my perch atop the mesa, next to the ruins of Mother's shell. The shadow lizards would wait until the birds had had their fill, then pick at what was left of the carcasses.

When I mastered the courage to return to the canyon, the creatures were nothing but cartilage; white cartilage against red sand. What had they been trying to say to me? How am I to know? I have been left with so little. Would Mother have known what to do with them? She never mentioned these creatures. She only talked about the stars, the space between the stars.

4 **I AM LONT** The Ferryman. I have been entrusted with ferrying the tribute through the spinning dust and light of Beauty's Door to Kaayem's Realm for the past thirty two years. To my sorrow, this is the last time I will perform the holy service. It is not my decision. I do not want to retire. I have not yet had the privilege of looking upon the face of God, and this pains me. Why He has hidden himself away from me all these years, I do not know.

The way of God is the way of mystery.

For two hundred years – ever since the coming of Kaayem in the form of a beast – Ferrymen have crossed to the other side with tribute children. There were some Ferrymen that never returned. And there were some who returned five, ten years after they walked through Beauty's Door, claiming to only have been gone a day. Many of the devoted saw this as a punishment of some kind, retribution for some ritual not performed correctly on the other side. But was it?

It could be that Kaayem extended their life out of gratitude.

The way of God is the way of mystery.

There have been some Ferrymen who crossed over who claimed to have seen His Beauteous True Face, and so became sanctified, attained sainthood. Stone busts of these saints line the corridor to the first Kaayem shrine inside the city council chambers. Lying awake in my cell, the night after my last journey to the other side, I slipped into sacrilege, wondering – were some of them lying? Were they *all* lying?

When you pass through Beauty's Door there is nothing but a roar of spinning dust, sand tearing at your skin, a blinding flash, and then you appear on a plain that closely resembles the plain west of the city. But it is not the same plain. This plain is scattered with huge structures, their symmetry resembling nothing so much as giant sea shells – the same smooth twists, striated with various shades of brown and red – casting long menacing shadows. I have often wondered: are they tombs, or are they eggs? I have believed them to be one, then the other; but lately, I have come to see them as both at the same time.

Are they the progeny of Kaayem? Can God have progeny? There is no God but Kaayem. Mysteries.

It is a long walk across the plain, through the blinding dust, through a maze of low lying shrubs – black-leaved, black-thorned – towards the Place of Beauty Rites deep inside a box canyon. The children cling to my robe, wince in the whirlwind, and I struggle with them, around the deadly shrubs, across the plain.

The Place of Beauty Rites is a barren place: boulders, rock walls, and bones; the bones of all the children given to Kaayem. The children do not struggle, they never struggle; they sleepwalk across the plain because they have mercifully been given a sedative before we crossed over, during the final ablutions in the council chambers. At the Place of Beauty Rites I give the children their last drink of water. This water is drugged, too, putting the children into a final sleep. After they close their eyes, I intone the catechism into the flying dust, then depart, working my way back across the plain to Beauty's Door, and through.

When during all of this does one have time to see the face of God? (And yet, there has been a smell sometimes, a smell like the sea. Is this the smell of God? Does he lurk nearby when I am intoning His Name, watching me? Can God have a smell of the sea?) So no, I have never seen the face of God. But I have consistently done my duty. I have nothing to recriminate myself for. I have lived a holy life.

Can a man really survive the face of God?

The council has been impatient for me to see the face of God. Belief in the sanctity of the city council is faltering. They need a Ferryman to bring back news of a holy terror, a beauteous terror, seconds away from destroying the city again. I tell them that there is nothing I can do. Would they like me to lie that I've seen His True Face?

I look into their faces and know that they do.

They claim to be privileged with special knowledge given to them by Kaayem Himself – that their will is the will of God – but I know the truth. I am a Ferryman. I travel between worlds. I worship the One True God, not the will of the council. No member of the council has been to the other side. The council members are council members only because of their wealth, nothing more. That, of course, is an ancient story.

Kaayem doesn't care about wealth. I and I alone, for the last thirty two years, have brought Him what He truly desires. I have experienced the terror of crossing over. I have done this ten times. What do the councilors know of terror? What do they know of the questions that ring through the body of every Ferryman every time we cross over: Will I return? If I return, will I return in my own time? Will Kaayem take me into his realm this time, devour me? This terror has strengthened me.

What do they know of sorrow? I am the one who looks into the eyes of the children as their eyelids flicker and drop. This sorrow has strengthened me.

What do they truly know of ritual? I am the one who intones the catechetical in the flying dust: "In the year 12,841, out of the sun and dust a beast appeared, wearing the bones of our children…and this God was Kaayem…bathing us in blood, revealing our ignorance, prophesying the

end…in order to lead us to the worship of the one God, Kaayem…"

What does the council know of any of this? The councilors are children. Let them do what they will. I will not lie for them. I know the truth: that we are all Kaayem's tears.

5 **HOW LONG HAVE** I been going through the motions, swinging my mantle in an arc under the brilliant sun, catching the dust, mingling it with blood, and weaving nothing? I am still naked, ignorant; and tired. No shell, no knowledge, no hope. And all the while, they come and they come, leaving their small ones to die in the same barren canyon below. Then they sneak back across the plain – furtive, fearful creatures – fleeing into the sun and dust.

I used to believe there was a purpose to all things. Mother spoke of our journey, weaving the black space between stars, building fires in the void; how we were the shapers, the weavers, creating patterns. I would look up into the night sky and see how I was a part of everything. And I would stare over the cliff edge of this mesa and see meaning in the great spiral sweeps of the journey shells scattered across the plain.

But now I know there is no purpose, no meaning, in anything. There is only the cartilage of the dead creatures lying in the canyon below, bleaching in the sun.

For so long, I have been descending into that canyon, desperate to speak with the creatures left behind, to find out what they want, why they come here, what it has to do with me. But the stench of their terror has never abated and quickly drives me away. "Why did they leave you here?" I shout at them as I flee. "Why do they keep bringing your kind here?" They have the same eyes as mine, so why can't they see this is a place of death?

Mother said the great shells on the plain are places of birth, of beginning. But I have been here so long and nothing has changed. Those shells will always remain silent, as the stars remain silent. There is no communication between the stars and this canyon. There has never been any communication between me and the tiny creatures that are left to die in the canyon below. They scream and scream and then they finally close their eyes and sleep and dream. Their dreams follow me all the way back up to the mesa top, filling the night around me: images of blood-hungry creatures hunting, hunting, desperately hungry for something they can never have; afraid of death, worshipping death. So many menacing shadows, so much fear. After one or two nights, the dreams finally dissolve and I know the creatures are dead.

Like Mother.

When I return, I always find their bodies entwined. Was it a comfort to have someone there to hold in the final moments? What difference did it make? They died and their deaths are as purposeless as mine will be. Oh, Mother, I am tired, so tired. I know now I will never weave a journey shell because there never was a shell to weave. My body is growing older and older, getting slower, and yet I have no more knowledge than I did when you died. I am a child in an adult body.

And these shells, these towers out on the plain, what are they really? A beautiful story told to give me hope, to help me continue. But it was a lie, wasn't it? There is only the void.

There is nothing left for me here now, Mother, and so today I braved the canyon and scraped the children's cartilage off the sand, brought them up here and began to weave blood and dust and cartilage. I cannot weave a shell, Mother, but I can weave a hard skin out of the remnants of these sad creatures. Tomorrow, at dawn, I will travel out to the place of flashing sun and spinning dust, and follow the blood-hungry creatures back to their terrible world. And I will make them suffer for what they have done.

There is no purpose…and so I will create my own…

Christien Gholson is the author of the novel *A Fish Trapped Inside the Wind* (Parthian, 2011), and a book of linked fictions *On the Side of the Crow* (Parthian, 2011). He has been many shapes before attaining congenial form: a black feather in a blue dust bin, a farmhand, a cigarette wrapper skipping across the desert floor, a factory worker, a fish falling from a clear blue sky, a union organiser, a book floating on a dark night sea, a word heard in a dream…the usual. He currently lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico and you can visit him online at christiengholson.blogspot.com.

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The Shadow Constabulary.

FISH ON FRIDAY

NEIL WILLIAMSON

Hello, Ms MacArthur? Hi, there. This is a courtesy call from ASDaTESCo. My name is— *ASDaTESCo.* The Agency for Sport, Diet and Technology Empowering Scotland's Citizens. My name is Aiden—

You *know* who we are, Ms MacArthur. Our representatives have had cause to contact you several times already this year. Well, that's not very nice. We're *not* Nazis. The ASDaTESCo initiative has been instrumental in transforming this nation from the Sick Men and Women of Europe into a horde of happy, healthy Hamishes. Yes. Yes, *Hamishes.* It's from our advertising campaign. You must have seen it. Oh, you don't watch telly? Having to go on the bike to power it is too much of a palaver? Well I'm sorry to hear that; have you tried adjusting the— No, no. I see. That's a shame. You're missing out on a whole lot of entertaining and informative programming. Yes, true, much of it is sport-based, but studies have proved that competitive sport is far more inspirational than all those reality shows and soaps and nasty, fattening cookery programmes they used to show. Especially since the ASDaTESCo Sport-in-Schools initiative saw Scotland shoot to the top in so many fields of international competition. Our happy, healthy Hamishes are sport-mad. What, you didn't even watch the World Cup Final? It was a classic. We were *very* unlucky. If it hadn't been for that pen— No, okay, fine. Not everyone's a sport fan.

Anyway, the reason for my call, Ms MacArthur, is not regarding your entertainment habits. It's about your dietary ones. Our system has flagged that your refrigerator seems to have forgotten to order your fish for this coming Friday. Well, yes, it *should* be impossible. And it only happens in one household in the whole city: yours. Look, Ms MacArthur, we know all about your history in *hacktivism…* Don't say that. We're *not* spying on you. We're *not* totalitarian oppressors. No, you're *not* living in a jackbooted Orwellian nightmare state. Ms MacArthur, please let's try and keep this conversation civil. We don't want to have to impose sanctions on you again. Just accept that we're aware of your history. Well, because you have a police record…and because you put *hacktivist (retired)*

on your Social Housing application form. We know you can hack into our system, Ms MacArthur. A child could hack into our system. But they don't, and do you know why? Because everybody likes the system. Everybody likes being happy and healthy.

Look, fish has many excellent health benefits— To be fair, it's not entirely relevant that you don't *like* it. It's part of your Social Housing agreement that you consume foodstuffs from the approved list. Just like topping up your calorie bank using the bike so that you can watch TV, use the internet and, ha ha, obviously, open the fridge. No, I'm afraid the fish is non-negotiable. And look at what you're missing! That haddock is reared right here in the River Clyde— It's *not* a cesspit. The Clyde may have had a, ahem, *murky* past… That was a joke. Yes it *was*. Well, I thought it was funny. Anyway, nowadays the river is a paragon of sustainable aquatic ecosystems. It's won awards. And the haddock are instrumental in— Don't call them *Frankenfish*. It's a simple and perfectly safe genetic modification that helps them grow big and tasty. Yes, big and— No, I hadn't heard that. A child? Oh, that's awful. I can't believe I didn't hear about that in the news… Just a minute, there's no record of a haddock eating a little— Ms MacArthur, are you pulling my leg? No, it *couldn't* happen. They're *not* monsters, they're just big fish. Believe me the river is perfectly safe and clean. That *scummy* stuff? Ms MacArthur, the Glasgow Green algae farms are central to the city's sustainability. The algae purifies the water, increases O_2 levels in the city centre and is a vital component of those mealworm burgers that you enjoy so much. Well, you eat enough of them. Yes, I know you *have* to. Yes, indeed, the approved list.

Oh, wouldn't you just? Yes, we noticed the *fillet steak* on your fridge's order in place of the fish, of course. What, *in place*? No *that* wasn't a joke. And neither is ordering *steak* of all things! You *know* that red meat is most definitely not on the approved list. Why? Because it's one of the most harmful, environmentally unsound, and ideologically objectionable sources of protein in human history, that's why. Look, I know you're an educated woman, Ms MacArthur. You can't deny that the ban on farming large herds of costly mammals that did little more than transform perfectly tasty and nutritious vegetables and grains into health-toxic meat and environmentally disastrous quantities of methane gas is beneficial not only to our own nation, but to the planet. Hmm? What do you say to that?

Tasty? *Ugh*! I can't believe— I wouldn't *want* to try it. It's barbaric…

Ms MacArthur, I have to apologise. That was an unkind and unprofessional thing to say, and reflects badly on me as a government-partner representative, a member of the Institute of Professional Customer Advisors and a happy, healthy Hamish. We understand that older citizens such as yourself still have difficulties adjusting to the new Scotland. The changes that swept through our society after independence were more extensive than anyone could have forecast. For younger generations, the way we live now – as a fit, healthy, caring, sharing, socialistic society where everyone gets not what they *want* but what they *need* – seems natural, but for people like your good self who remember the bad old days of apathy, obesity and dietary catastrophe, it must have come as a terrible shock. Scotland is the envy of Europe now— I'm sorry? I'm giving you the what? The *boak*? I'm sorry, I don't understand.

Yes. Yes, that's perfectly true. Technically, my organisation in its previous incarnations as leading chain supermarkets *did* largely dictate the national diet on a for-profit basis. And their aggressive monopolisation strategies *were* a factor in ridding the high street of its beloved independent traders. Yes, the butchers and the grocers and the fishmongers and, that's right, the corner shops and the— Sorry? What was a *chip shop* again? Why are you laughing? But that was the old Scotland, Ms MacArthur. The old way of doing things. There was too much choice, and that allowed people to make *poor* choices. Yes, the Scottish Government knew that the ASDaTESCo name might retain negative connotations, but at the time they bought out the stores and supply chains from their owners it was deemed advantageous to ease the transition by retaining the branding. And not only that, redefining the names of those two old monsters was a symbol of how we have redefined the attitudes to health and nutrition across the whole country. With the ASDaTESCo initiative, every Scottish man, woman and child gets cheap, healthy, varied and one hundred per cent locally-sourced food delivered to their home automatically as part of their citizenship contract, which also includes their home, appliances and, guaranteed, the minimum amount of exercise required to keep them healthy and happy. Yes, those letters used to represent many bad things, but not any more.

So, can we agree there'll be no more hacking your fridge's ordering script, Ms MacArthur. Hmm, please? We really don't want to put you on a week of double exercise again. No you didn't *almost starve* last time. You had all the krillcakes you could possibly eat, and you had unlimited access to the contents of your fridge. All you needed to do was pedal a little. Oh, Ms MacArthur, that's simply

not true. You're not a frail old woman. Your health report says there's plenty of pedalling in those legs of yours yet, and you've three years until you qualify for a visiting old-person's calorie donor. No, I'm sorry I don't know if they wear tight shorts. What a question to ask. Look, if you're not keen on pedalling the bike do you know that there are other ways you can add to your calorie bank? Many of your neighbours, for example, put in a few hours a week tending the locust farm on the roof of your building. The work's not too taxing and you get the added bonus of doing your bit for the city's food bank.

Ms MacArthur, are you all right? Are you crying? Oh, look, I'm sorry if I've been a little stern with you, but it really is for your own good— I know, it's difficult. I know, you just want things to be how they used to be. But really, I promise you it's better this way. Look at yourself! How many ninety seven year olds were as fit and able as you are now back in the bad old days? There you are, see? I told you it makes sense. We're fortunate to be living in these times, Ms MacArthur, very fortunate indeed.

So. Please. No more steaks? Or, any of the other things that have mysteriously crept in there over the months, let me see…mutton pies, beef olives…*traditional haggis*, you scallywag. Even if the system let these things through to the ordering script, I don't know where on Earth it would get them from, I really don't.

Okay, thank you. Good. So your next delivery will include the haddock, as originally intended. Just try it. I'm sure it's not as bad as you think. Will you? For me? Good! I'm proud of you. We'll make you a happy, healthy Hamish yet.

Oh, before I go, I've just noticed that there seems to be an error of, goodness me, a factor of ten in your cooking oil. I'll just amend— No? Oh, you use it for lubricating the bike? And that works, does it? Well, that's very resourceful of you. Waste not, want not. Absolutely. To be honest, the approved gear oil *is* rather expensive. Well, in that case I'll leave it be. It's not as if you're going to *cook* anything with it, after all. Ha, ha. Well, I'm glad we managed to see eye to eye at last. Have a happy, healthy day, Ms MacArthur.

Goodbye.

Neil Williamson's last *Interzone* appearance was 'The Golden Nose' in issue #253. 'Fish on Friday' was written amid the froth and flurry of optimism and idealism in the run-up to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. He believes that, one day, it still might turn out to be prophecy. Neil's debut novel *The Moon King* ("Literary fantasy at its best" *The Guardian*) is in the shops now.

BOOK ZONE

ANCILLARY SWORD
Ann Leckie
plus interview

SHADOWBOXER
Tricia Sullivan

THE BRICK MOON/ ANOTHER BRICK IN THE MOON
Edward Everett Hale & Adam Roberts

WILLFUL CHILD
Steven Erikson

RETRIBUTION
Mark Charan Newton

TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY-ONE BAKER STREETS
edited by David Thomas Moore

MODERN MASTERS OF SCIENCE FICTION: GREG EGAN
Karen Burnham

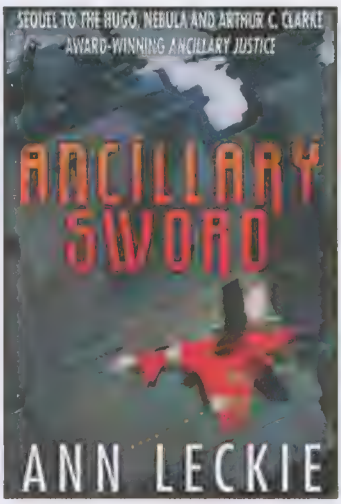
SIBILANT FRICATIVE
Adam Roberts

IRREGULARITY
edited by Jared Shurin

SOLARIS RISING 3
edited by Ian Whates

SACRIFICE ON SPICA III
Eric Brown

OF WHIMSIES & NOUBLES
Matthew Hughes



ANCILLARY SWORD
Ann Leckie
Orbit pb, 400pp, £8.99

Ancillary Sword is the second in a series of space operas which have gathered huge acclaim over the last year, with *Ancillary Justice* winning the Hugo, Nebula, BSFA Award, Arthur C. Clarke Award and Locus Award, and being nominated for several others.

The series is set in a galactic empire, the Radch, comprising thousands of systems. The worlds of the Radch are ruled by families and houses who impose an elaborate culture of customs and religion on their subject peoples by invasion, subjugation and eventual assimilation. The armies of the Radch are the ancillaries of the series title, drone soldiers created by implanting control electronics in living humans, making them extensions of the AIs which run the warships and the huge troopships; each single intelligence with potentially thousands of bodies. The Radch itself is ruled by Anaander Mianaai, who uses a similar technology to distribute and extend herself over thousands of bodies and to control the Radch from everywhere at once.

In *Ancillary Justice* Breq, the last remaining ancillary of the troopship *Justice of Toren*, journeyed to confront Anaander Mianaai and to exact revenge for the execution of Lieutenant Awn, one of her officers. In doing so, she discovered a schism among the many aspects of the ruler of the Radch and set alight a covert civil war. In *Ancillary Sword* she has been rewarded by one of the factions and is now the captain of a medium warship, the *Mercy of Kalr*. She is posted to the system of Athoek to maintain the peace and to defend it against potential attack by the other faction. While warships are able to create their own interstellar gates, civilian ships are not and the gate system has been shut down as a result of the civil war. Bree must keep the local trading magnates pacified while at the same time look out for disloyalty among the commanders of the local picket of warships.

Ancillary Sword is paced differently from *Ancillary Justice*. Where *Ancillary Justice* was structured in two timelines – the past leading up to Awn's execution and the journey of Breq to find Anaander Mianaai and confront her – *Ancillary Sword* takes place in the present following their meeting and is set mostly in the one location of Athoek. The book is much more of a political novel than the previous one, examining the history and desires of the characters around Breq, and turning on which faction of Anaander Mianaai has the loyalties of each character. It also goes deeper into the character of Breq, both as she was as an AI with multiple bodies and points of awareness, and now limited to the one. AIs in this world are emotional beings; although they are not treated as people by their human masters, they have likes and dislikes, even loves, and Breq's attachment to Awn is examined trough her meeting with Awn's sister.

The book also examines the imperialism of the Radch in a different way than in *Ancillary Justice*. Where in the previous novel much of the action was set during the occupation and assimilation of a new world, Athoek has long been subject to the Radch and is peopled by several cultures, some of whom have been displaced as forced labour to work on the tea plantations. Through a subplot of an attempted assassination and investigation by Breq, Ann Leckie is able to display the plantation class structure and show both the rulers' oppression of the transplanted populations and their treatment by the original natives.

While the story allows deeper worldbuilding and characterisation than the previous novel, it does not neglect the fact that there is a civil war occurring off-stage, and that other factions of Anaander Mianaai are working against Breq and the faction that she is allied to. In addition, there are other interested parties, notably the alien Presger, whose representative has been trapped in Athoek. The Presger have a peace treaty with the Radch, which is essentially an agreement that they will stop killing humans so long as humans do not annoy them, and any disruption is a potential threat to the whole of the Radch. The novel also sets up the mystery of what is on the other side of the Ghost Gate, the other gate in the system, through which come occasional artefacts, thousands of years old; older even than Breq.

Ancillary Sword, while different from *Ancillary Justice*, is easily as enjoyable. It develops the world and characters in a way that deepens the story and the potential for the final volume in the series. While it would be advisable to read *Ancillary Justice* first, *Ancillary Sword* is itself a complete novel and it has its own concerns and satisfying resolutions.

ANN LECKIE: WHO IS ANYONE ANYWAY?

REVIEW AND INTERVIEW BY ELAINE GALLAGHER

First of all, congratulations for winning so many awards with *Ancillary Justice*. How do you feel about the reception that your first novel has had? How do you feel that *Ancillary Sword* will be received in the light of that? Thank you so much! The reception of *Ancillary Justice* has been beyond amazing. It's almost a checklist of extravagant writer wish fulfilment fantasies, seriously. So I've been feeling a surreal combination of delighted and incredulous. Like, this can't actually be really, truly happening? Wait, it's really, truly happening. It's been just an incredible year.

Of course it means lots of people have been wondering what *Ancillary Sword* would be like, and whether it would live up to *Ancillary Justice*. And that's a bit terrifying, to be honest. Because like I said, the reception of *Ancillary Justice* was pretty unreal. It's impos-

sible *Ancillary Sword* could equal that. And of course, some readers appear to be disappointed – they don't like *Ancillary Sword* as much as *Ancillary Justice*, for whatever reason – and some appear to be delighted. Which is about normal, and pretty awesome. I really don't expect to have another year like last year, though. And that's okay. It was a lot of fun, and I'm good with enjoying watching other writers get attention and praise and knowing how gratifying that is.

***Ancillary Sword* is narrower in scope than *Ancillary Justice*, taking place mostly in one location and in one timeline. What has this allowed you to do with the story?**
It allowed me to focus much more on personal and social interactions. And to dig into the worldbuilding in a way that isn't possible when you're going from setting to setting. On top of that, I didn't want to write the same book twice – I wanted *Sword* to be different from *Justice*.

The *Ancillary* series examines some tropes of space opera, such as galactic empires, in a way that is rarely done. Did you set out in writing the novels to look at subject cultures and immigrant and displaced populations in an empire?
Actually, I didn't. I started out with the ships and with Anaander Mianaai and bits of Radchaai culture and history and thought "How cool would a story with these characters be?" But characters are who they are because of the world they live in – and it's difficult to worldbuild an empire without running into all kinds of issues, including subject cultures and displaced populations. Or, it's entirely possible, of course, lots of fun, entertaining science fiction doesn't concern itself with such things, but the more I read and pondered, the more it seemed like it belonged in what I was doing.

The workings of the ancillary technology, and Anaander Mianaai as a special case, are developed in more depth in *Ancillary Sword*, as are the emotions and development of AIs. Would you like to talk about what interests you in these technologies?
Mostly, I think, the questions of thought and identity. We go through the day, mostly, assuming that the question of who anyone is, let alone who's a person and who isn't, is a simple, clear cut thing. And for simple, practical purposes – just as a matter of getting through the day – that works, mostly, and it kind of has to. But when you start looking closer that all breaks down. The same with thought – at least in the culture I live in, we assume that thought is one thing and emotion is another thing, and emotion is often considered to be something mysterious. Who knows why anyone feels the way they do? Except, really, emotions are very physical, very much a product of specific physical processes. We interpret the results of those processes differently, depending on our culture and other circumstances, but still. And the difference between thought and emotion isn't anywhere near as clear and obvious as we often assume. So the more I thought about my multi-bodied characters, the more interesting those questions became: Who is anyone anyway? How do you know who anyone is? If you don't have a human body, can you possibly have human emotions? Can you possibly escape having human emotions if you do have a human body? Or several? The technology gave me a way to play with those thoughts.

"The difference between thought and emotion isn't anywhere near as clear and obvious as we often assume"

One of the major discussion points about the *Ancillary* series has been the gendering of the language, using "she" to refer to all of the characters. An interesting experiment that I have heard of has been to give the books to a range of people and then ask them about the gender of the different characters, to see whether different people read the gender of characters differently. Have you found that people have read characters as different genders than you had in mind?
Oh, definitely. For the few characters who I did begin with a gender in mind, yes, but also for the ones I never did assign a gender to. I've seen reviewers or commenters refer to Breq as "he", for instance, and I've spoken to one reader who initially read the Awn/Skaaiat relationship as F/M, and then realised there was no actual evidence for that and wondered what might change if they assumed differently. And realised quickly that assigning genders to those characters really changed their take on that relationship. It's been really interesting seeing where people have assumed or assigned genders to characters I didn't.

You edited a magazine, *Giganotosaurus*, which has published several award-nominated stories. Who do you recommend as interesting new writers?
I have to admit, I'm probably not as up on the newest up and coming writers as I'd like. I'd definitely say check out Zen Cho. Or Keffy Kehrli. Or Polenth Blake. None of whom is really "new" in my mind, but they are writers I've run across in the last few years and really liked their work a lot.

SHADOWBOXER
Tricia Sullivan
Ravenstone pb, 304pp, £7.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

There is a point in *Shadowboxer* when one realises that a journey undertaken by one of the main characters really has nothing to do with their personal growth, and everything to do with ensuring that two objects are in a certain place at a certain time in order to achieve a certain plot outcome. It is a particularly clumsy moment in a novel composed of two parts which already seem to be remarkably ill at ease with one another.

On the one hand, we have Jade Barrera, a young woman of colour living in New York, who is training to become a professional martial arts fighter. In the past she has been in serious trouble because she couldn't control her aggression, but of late she has found sanctuary at Mr Big's Combat Sports Emporium. As the novel opens, Jade is in trouble again, for breaking a wealthy martial arts film star's nose after he threw a bottle at the gym's resident cat. As a result, she is despatched to Thailand, to train with one of Mr Big's contacts, in the hope this will improve her attitude.

Interleaved with this is the story of Mya, a Burmese girl from one of the refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border, placed in the care of elderly western philanthropist Richard Fuller. Fuller, Mr Richard, is in fact a manufacturer of bespoke designer drugs, which he trafficks round the world using small children to help him gain access to a mysterious 'forest' which seems to exist on another plane. Mr Richard requires drugs to do this, while Mya is able to do it quite naturally. Now Mr Richard claims to have perfected a process by which he will permanently transfer his consciousness into Mya's body and make direct use of her ability.

Add to this, Shea, a young Thai-American translator who has come to realise, in part, what Mr Richard is doing, and the stage is set for a fast-moving adventure with possible supernatural overtones.

Except that these two stories have very little connection other than the one that Sullivan has forced upon them, a connection that in hindsight seems so contrived one can only wonder that it was allowed to pass, particularly when there is at least one other potential connection which might be have been explored for a more convincing effect. Sullivan opts instead for narrative convenience, as a result of which the novel's structure, already flawed, is totally undermined.

Other aspects of this novel are equally problematic. Sullivan writes confidently about the world of martial arts, drawing on her own experience, but as she draws further away from the familiar, the writing becomes somehow thinner and troubling questions begin to emerge. Why, for example, does Jade tell her own story while Mya's story comes to us as a third-person narrative, even though this story is supposedly about Mya's burgeoning agency? I am uneasy too about the ways in which ethnicity is conveyed through the use of fractured English. It is one thing for Sullivan to represent Jade's rudimentary Thai as pidgin English, but more than one character switches between grammatically correct and colloquial English in the space of a few sentences, for no reason I could readily understand. Certainly, it had nothing to do with code-switching.

Likewise, one has the sense that while Sullivan is working hard to sympathetically portray a variety of issues, the novel doesn't so much internalise these issues as preach them. Jade and her mother are the victims of domestic violence; Jade is also acutely aware that the colour of her skin prompts people to view her as a criminal, and that she is constantly being objectified for being a female fighter. We are told all of this, and invited to sympathise with Jade. But because she is the narrator, there is no mechanism for challenging her other assumptions; for example, the essentialising of Thailand and its people, and her ignorance of quiltbag politics. Likewise, Mya's narrative conveniently sidesteps her life in the refugee camp, instead using his need for her magical gifts as a way of obliquely addressing Mr Richard's activities as a child-abuser. It seems that while New York equals reality, Burma and Thailand must remain as the fantastic other, which in itself seems to be a profound if, one hopes, inadvertent comment on western colonialism.

One can, of course, never know an author's intentions in producing a novel, only consider what finally arrives on the page. In this instance, it seems to me that two potentially interesting contemporary stories, about a female martial arts fighter and a trafficked Burmese refugee, have become entangled in a net of entirely unnecessary fantastical coincidence, to the detriment of both.

THE BRICK MOON/ANOTHER BRICK IN THE MOON
Edward Everett Hale & Adam Roberts
Jurassic/Gold Medal Books pb, 419pp, £6.99

Duncan Lunan

The publisher's logo itself has nostalgic significance: Gold Medal Books were an imprint of the US Fawcett Publications in the 1960s, publishing high-quality SF in the 1960s. The Jurassic/Gold Medal logo looks similar but has a dinosaur superimposed.

As the introduction says, the reprinting of this particular 'dinosaur' is timely, marking the 300th anniversary of the first Longitude Act, while Europe is beginning to deploy its Galileo system, which will be compatible with GPS while greatly expanding the civilian uses of satellite navigation, and incidentally make European armed forces independent of GPS if need be.

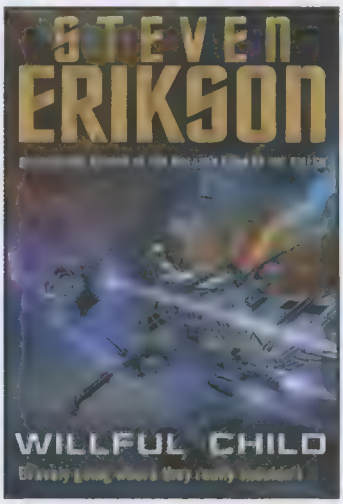
In the 1950s, no book on space flight generally or in anticipation of Earth satellites (and there were lots of them) was complete without a reference to E.E. Hale's *The Brick Moon*. Published as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly* 1869–70, it was the first written work on artificial satellites since Sir Isaac Newton, the first account of them in fiction, and probably the only one until Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's *Beyond the Planet Earth* in 1916. Yet it didn't seem to be available in print and, as far as I can gather, was printed only twice during the 20th century, with no more editions until very recently. Hale died in 1909, so there don't seem to be copyright reasons to explain why this 'classic of Victorian science fiction' should have been 'lost' for so long.

The Brick Moon was to be an applications satellite, to help navigators find their longitude. Although Harrington's chronometer's had won the competition run by the Admiralty and the Royal Observatory, they were expensive and could be broken, lost or stolen, but once launched an artificial satellite would always be there to sight on. Brick was adopted as the building material to withstand the heat of passage through the atmosphere – the editors' claim that it foreshadows the Space Shuttle's ceramic tiles might seem far-fetched until you realise that supposedly it's travelling at orbital speed from the outset.

The Brick Moon would be placed in polar orbit over the Greenwich Meridian and, as the introduction points out, in real life it would drift in longitude, due to the pulls of Sun, Moon and the Earth's equatorial bulge. However those effects can be offset in a suitably inclined orbit to make the satellite Sun-synchronous, and weather and Earth resources satellites use that to bring them over the same locations at the same times each day. The Brick Moon's usefulness would be somewhat limited by its faintness: after its accidental launch, when astronomers report it they think it's an asteroid with a large movement in declination. 18th and 19th century astronomers thought there could be natural undiscovered moons like that, and the idea persisted until Clyde Tombaugh searched for them in the 1950s without success.

Like the occasional ship in real life, the Brick Moon is launched accidentally when it breaks free of its cradle during a storm – with the workers, wives and families who were sheltering inside. Once located in orbit, they communicate by jumping up and down in unison, in Morse code. They survive because evolution proceeds in their new world at high acceleration – "Write to Darwin that he is all right. We began with lichens and have come as far as palms and hemlocks", and their chickens have already evolved into ostriches. But to the disappointment of their sponsors on Earth, they are more interested in the outcomes of newspaper serials than in improving texts on law, politics and religion, much less in the schism within the sect to which the sponsors belong. (Newspaper serials were the soap operas of their day: crowds lined the quays of New York shouting to incoming ships, "Is Little Nell dead?")

As that implies, the narrative is lighthearted and filled with digs at mid-19th century society, some of them still topical – one of the jokes in Arthur C. Clarke's *A Fall of Moondust* is stolen from *The Brick Moon* (uncredited). *Another Brick in the Moon*, the sequel by Adam Roberts, brings the story up to date: if the Brick Moon still exists, but we can't see it, then it's in a different inertial frame of reference, due to warping of space-time by the flywheels which launched it, and now it presents a major threat to us – which is a nod back to Arthur C., recalling the gimmick of 'What Goes Up' in his *Tales From the White Hart*. But now that the story is back in circulation, one has a feeling that this may not be the end of the matter.



WILLFUL CHILD
Steven Erikson
Bantam Press hb, 352pp, £13.99

Stephen Theaker

"Dad! First contact! Vulcans!" "Wish it was, boy," Harry replied. "More like…idiots." Three-eyed aliens visiting Earth in the "Age of Masturbation" leave behind a spaceship and get us started on a programme of galactic expansion. A century or so later Captain Hadrian Alan Sawback finagles his way into command of the starship *Willful Child*. He's a terrible sexist, obsessed with trying to have sex with the female crew members and making sure male crew members know their place: not on away missions and well out of the limelight.

Halley Sin-Dour is his Spock, Saavik and Number One. She makes announcements "in a deep, full-throated voice that rolled out, came back, and landed in Hadrian's groin". Combat specialist Lieutenant Galk comes from a world where the dictionary entry for mundanity runs to thirty pages, and Doctor Printlip deflates whenever he speaks for too long. Pilot Jocelyn Sticks was personally selected by the captain on the basis of her file photo, and he looks forward to the way that "from his position in the command chair, she would have to twist her upper body round to address him". Hm.

The captain remembers television. He wears a polyester uniform, records a personal log, and insists on a view of the stars when they are in transit. The ship's ongoing mission, according to him, is "to seek out strange new worlds on which to plant the Terran flag, to subjugate and if necessary obliterate new life-forms". Their first assigned mission is to investigate the smuggling of knockoff Terran sports apparel in the Blarad System, but the ship gets infected with a mysterious AI, Tammy, who takes them off to the Exclusion Zone, deep inside Radulak-Klang territory. This leads to an appropriately episodic series of adventures that provide plenty of novelty and surprise.

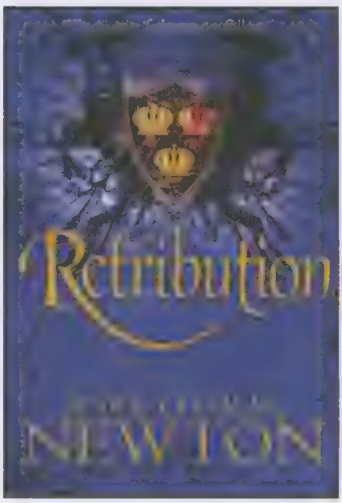
Science fiction satire may be a departure for Steven Erikson from the fantasy of the Malazan Book of the Fallen and the brilliant Bauchelain and Korbal Broach novellas, but this isn't a feeble *Game of Groans* parody of a genre's surface quirks; it retains the abrasive intelligence that characterised those novellas, and applies it to a deep understanding of the foibles and structures of *Star Trek*. It feels like a passion project rather than an opportunistic cash-in on the success of John Scalzi's *Redshirts*.

"See what comes with standardizing every approach on the ecliptic?" observes the captain after a near miss with a freighter. "Ridiculous, you'd think we were boats or something." (*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* famously took its cues on everything from uniforms to battles from the Horatio Hornblower series.) The book references everything from Wesley Crusher to the way Kirk cheated on the *Kobayashi Maru* test, while constantly interrogating the premise of the show. Would the human race be wise to hang its hopes on a Captain Kirk? Would a galaxy dominated by humans ("a voracious, appallingly shortsighted sentient species") be such a good idea?

The problem is that the book's affectionate spoofing of sex-obsessed Kirk means it features a good deal of sexism itself, and though it's coming from a particular character's mouth and point of view some readers may find it a bit too much. To add another example to those above, at one point the captain watches a "marine cross the bridge, gaze fixing on the meaty sway of her behind". As a thirteen-year-old I might well have thought "meaty sway of her behind" the most evocative phrase I had ever read, and I'd probably have thought this the best book ever written. Being an adult, I enjoyed it despite the lechery, rather than because of it.

The captain does turn out to have rather more to him than at first appears, which makes for an interesting plot, and along with the number of times he comes a cropper it's hard to think the book endorses his behaviour. It reminded me of the animated television series *Archer*. Archer is another gifted, overconfident and oversexed buffoon, but he is partnered with Lana, who constantly calls him on his sexism, and reminds viewers to laugh at him, not with him. A Lana might have done Captain Sawback some good.

"Hostile planets, hostile aliens. Hostile aliens on hostile planets," says the captain, "and out there, in that unending cavalcade of danger, I intend to enjoy myself." Many readers will enjoy themselves too, but read a preview before buying, just in case. I'd like to read a sequel or two – it has the vigour, sauce and sense of adventure that latter-day *Star Trek* sorely lacked – but I wouldn't argue with anyone who loathed every word.



RETRIBUTION
Mark Charan Newton
Tor hb, 430pp, £18.99

Lawrence Osborn

Retribution is the second volume in a series of crime fantasies whose central character, Lucan Drakenfeld, is an agent of the Sun Chamber, which enforces law and maintains peace across the Vispasian Royal Union, a loose federation of diverse nation-states. Lucan is by no means a typical fantasy hero: he has no particular martial or occult skills, he suffers from epilepsy, and he is plagued with self-doubt. On the other hand, he is basically a decent human being and refreshingly optimistic in spite of his constant exposure to the darker side of human nature. To compensate for some of his weaknesses, Newton has given him an assistant, Leana, who is a skilled warrior. The first novel, *Drakenfeld*, combined this likeable central character with a plot in which good ultimately triumphs and the truth is revealed, which led me to hope that the series might be the beginning of the fight-back against the grimdark tendencies that have infected so much recent fantasy literature. I have been eagerly awaiting this sequel.

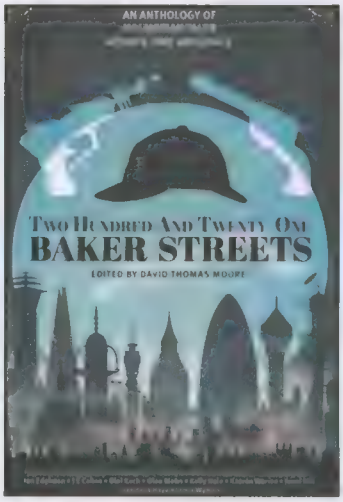
The new story begins just a few weeks after the events recounted in *Drakenfeld*. Lucan and Leana have been ordered to Kuvash, capital of the northern nation of Koton, to investigate a brutal murder. Two more murders that bear certain similarities to the first take place shortly after their arrival. In all cases, the victims were tortured before death, their bodies were mutilated and subsequently left to be found in public places. But what clinches the connection between the deaths is the fact that all the victims had possessed examples of an extremely unusual gemstone. As Lucan and Leana follow the trail of clues, it leads them to uncover a decades old conspiracy implicating leading members of society in human trafficking and a sinister religious cult. In addition to carrying out the duties that brought them to Kuvash, the Queen of Koton co-opts them to protect her daughter, and they succeed in foiling an assassination plot by a rival clan. Meanwhile, the precarious political situation in Lucan's homeland, the neighbouring country of Detrata – a political situation brought about in part by their previous investigation – has degenerated to the point where an imperialist senate has gained power. At the end of *Retribution*, as Lucan and Leana leave Koton, Detratan legions are marching into the country.

Retribution is well plotted. Its story arcs are carefully woven together and equally carefully disentangled in the denouement. The story is also well paced with just the right amount of action to keep the reader's attention. Nevertheless, I struggled to like this book. I was hoping for a departure from grimdark tendencies, but instead this volume is unremittingly grim. By the end of the novel, Drakenfeld's decency and optimism are looking increasingly naive and his rejection of a gift with the potential to cure his epilepsy may well strike the reader as quixotic.

By comparison with its predecessor, the characterisation in *Retribution* was disappointing. Some effort was clearly put into developing two new characters – Sulma Tan and Princess Nambu – but many of the others were stereotypical. Unfortunately, given that this story could otherwise stand on its own, Lucan and Leana were not as clearly characterised in this volume. We are given new insights into Leana's background, but in spite of this she seems less likeable: gone is the clear-sighted observer of a strange culture who is easily able to match Lucan's intelligence; here she comes across as cold and even psychopathic.

One of my irritations with *Drakenfeld* was an excess of unsubtle info-dumping, which I felt was exacerbated by the combination of a first-person perspective and a setting with which the central character was very familiar. I had hoped the foreign setting of *Retribution* would allow any necessary info-dumping to be handled more naturally. Unfortunately I still found the info-dumping distracting. Another irritation that has found its way into this volume is a tendency to overuse vague descriptive adjectives. In addition, at times I felt the language – particularly in some of the dialogue – was strangely formal. The result was that I was less able to enjoy the story because these issues kept forcing me to pay attention to the mechanics of the writing.

In conclusion, I can't wholeheartedly recommend it. However, anyone who enjoyed *Drakenfeld* will certainly want to read *Retribution* as the second act in a larger drama involving the future of the entire Vispasian Union.



TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY-ONE BAKER STREETS
edited by David Thomas Moore
Abaddon pb, 336pp, £7.99

Ian Hunter

Sherlock Holmes is a character that has never seemed to have gone away, even after the death of his creator. We're had long-running movies of various quality starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, not to mention other movie incarnations starring Peter Cushing, Nicol Williamson, Christopher Lee, Robert Stephens, Christopher Plummer and others right up to a slightly steampunk reboot with Robert Downey Jnr. Then there has been the TV versions, Cushing again, and Jeremy Brett and more recently, of course, *Sherlock*, the BBC's stuttering update which gives us a Holmes of sociopathic tendencies not averse to killing the odd billionaire blackmailer when he can't bring him to justice, and across the ocean we have a tattooed Jonny Lee Miller in *Elementary* not averse to having sex with two sisters, purely for research purposes you understand, but most shockingly of all, his Watson, is…wait for it, a woman! Doctor Joan Watson, a former surgeon and now addict companion, making sure Holmes doesn't start on the heroin again. I won't mention Holmes' many radio appearances but check out the Gielgud/Richardson version with Orson Welles as Moriarty and the BBC radio versions with Clive Merrison as a gleeful Holmes with the late Michael Williams as Watson. He never goes away – and if the new novel *Moriarty* by Anthony Horowitz is one of the few official novels endorsed by the Conan Doyle estate then there have been a heck of a lot of unofficial titles with arguably the best of the bunch penned by Nicholas Meyer and Loren D. Estleman, along with recent novels by Guy Adams, George Mann and James Lovegrove.

Now we have more short stories in *Two Hundred and Twenty-One Baker Streets*, subtitled "an anthology of Holmesian tales across time and space", the "otherness" of these tales being underlined by a cover showing a skyline of a futuristic London and a ray gun beside Watson's old trusty service revolver. While fantastic, some riff off Conan Doyle, in title at least. Therefore there is 'A Scandal in Hobohemia' (the very first story in the anthology where Holmes runs a travelling carnival and tells fortunes dressed as a woman, while Watson is black and has lost a leg during the First World War), 'The Adventure of the Speckled Bandana' and 'A Study in Scarborough.'

As Jamie Wyman's 'A Scandal of Hobohemia' might indicate, we are certainly in for a very different interpretation of Holmes and Watson, and they do turn up in other countries too, depending on where the writer hails from. In Joan De La Haye's 'The Rich Man's Hand' we are in South Africa, in a tale involving black magic and, ah, a rich man's hand, removed after he was dead, although he might still have been alive when his intestines were whipped out. Likewise, Kaaron Warren's 'The Lantern Men' takes us to Australia where Holmes (now an architect) and Watson (now a builder) have been friends since childhood and that friendship might hold the key to some disappearances and why houses are always haunted, even new ones. We are in America for 'Half There/All There' where Holmes and Watson are in the swinging sixties and encountering Andy Warhol's Factory – turn on, tune in, and drop dead, you might say. Los Angeles is the setting for 'All the Single Ladies' where a female Holmes must solve the murders of students who took part in a reality TV show, which should be easy as they all seem to have been patients of campus doctor John Watson.

Where this anthology works best is when the writer really goes "out there", so highlights include Emma Newman's 'A Woman's Place' which reveals why Mrs Hudson is so interested in Holmes' cases and why she lingers so long after serving the tea; Jenni Hill's 'Parallels' where our two heroes are two teenage girls called Charlotte and Jane who lead multiple lives in the world of Holmes/Watson fanfiction; and Adrian Tchaikovsky's 'A Final Conjuration' where in order to prevent war after the murder of a great Wizard, Wu Tsen, must use the skills of his pet demon Sherlock to solve the crime and prevent the war from happening. Perhaps the most far out and most enjoyable of all is Guy Adams' 'A Study in Scarborough' where Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are two greats from the golden age of radio comedy, but when young Arthur Doyle gets to meet Watson to research his new book, all is not what it seems.

Well-written, thought-provoking and fun, *Two Hundred and Twenty-One Baker Streets* deserves to be read, and not just by Sherlock Holmes fans.

GREG EGAN
Karen Burnham
University of Illinois Press pb, 196pp, £14.99

John Howard

This is the fourth in the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series. Previous volumes have covered Gregory Benford, John Brunner and William Gibson. But of these only Greg Egan is very much of this parish, having his first story 'Mind Vampires' in *Interzone* #18 not far off thirty years ago. Egan at first wrote horror but soon slid over into a different orbit, publishing many more stories here including some of his most highly regarded.

Karen Burnham hasn't set herself the easiest of tasks. The book is either the window through which the subject is revealed, or the glass in which it is embedded. But you can't only consider the glass, no matter how much, as here, the window has been washed and is sparkling, with all panes clear. Any smears or scratches recall human imperfectability – and especially of writers. From the beginning of his career, Greg Egan has maintained a notable reticence about himself. Egan must be unique (at least amongst living SF writers) in his steadfast guardianship over his identity and appearance. He has a reputation for being reclusive – which Burnham tackles, and Egan joyfully explodes. And while the cover of *Greg Egan* gives out his name as title, plus other necessary details, the generic cover design as used for other books in the series is subverted by the use of a silhouette – unidentifiable, anonymous – in place of the author photograph. Even before the book is opened, Egan is saying, in effect, *My work's the thing*. And so it should be.

Like author, like book. *Greg Egan* is clearly structured. In her introduction Burnham gives context and sets the overall scene, mapping out the territory into which she intends to lead us. We get some relevant tasters from the interview with the author at the end of the book, which waits there like the most wished-for treat wedged into the very end of a Christmas stocking. Egan summarises himself: "If I'm pleased with one general achievement, it's to have contributed something to the very small subset of literature that engages in a meaningful way with the full context of human existence." Agreed – and off we go.

Then follow five chapters, each with a self-explanatory title examining that particular theme throughout Egan's writing and also relating it, when this can be done, to the context of his life. The chapters are: 'Writing Radical Hard SF'; 'Ethical Standards'; 'Identity and Consciousness'; 'Scientific Analysis'; 'Science and Society'. Burnham also links individual stories through the various chosen themes – which are frequently porous and not amenable to being walled-in, isolated. Egan emerges as a highly demanding writer, someone who wants his readers to put in the work, to "grasp, learn, understand" for themselves. (He has high standards, as does Burnham, who is far from uncritical. For example: Egan's "upward trajectory has perhaps peaked".)

But there's no doubt that Egan is the creator of some of the most absorbing and sustained thought-experiments in science fiction, and he makes the old wonder-term 'conceptual breakthrough' shine out in the newly-minted currency it should always be. These vast thoughts are, in particular, most evident in his more recent novels, including *Incandescence* (2008) and the tremendous trilogy *Orthogonal* (2011–13). Egan's use of diagrams is noted, as well as his willingness – compulsion, perhaps – to supply his readers with background material and further solid work through his website. His motto is "Stay curious to stay sane".

Burnham notes that whether writing about the aliens who inhabit his thought-experiments, virtual humans, or the real variety, Egan's concern with their identity, personal integrity and ethical conduct – by and towards them – is paramount. High standards again: Burnham mentions the "chill" feeling often found in Egan's work, and then turns it all upside-down as she points out – casually, disarmingly, and truthfully – that the same work frequently involves the collision of this with irrational characters and ambiguous situations, all mixed-up and messy, like in our real universe. And so, revealed then, is Egan's moral universe, as humanistic as they come, even when the characters are very possibly not 'human'. He stretched the boundaries yet again: and engagement leads to respect.

Finishing with the interview and a useful Select Bibliography, *Greg Egan* is a fine introduction (or refresher course) to an often difficult but always worthwhile modern master. In her study Burnham provides a critical engagement that makes the reader want to go to the texts, to read, to think – and stay sane.

SIBILANT FRICATIVE
Adam Roberts
NewCon Press pb, 272pb, £14.99

Paul Graham Raven

Adam Roberts is to para-literary criticism as Stewart Lee is to comedy. In a recent interview, Lee explains how he's taken deliberate steps over the last decade to create a situation where his audience comes to him on his own terms, rather than on anyone else's expectations or promises. This included tactics such as embellishing tour posters with negative reviews alongside positive ones (this worked well for the late Iain Banks, if you recall), and repeatedly framing his work as being "aimed at middle-class, white, liberal Guardian readers", which (so Lee claims) has the counter-intuitive effect of making all sorts of other types of people turn up, because people are quite fond of defying other people who tell them whether or not they should like a thing.

Of course, there's a difference between postmodern stand-up comedy and writing (admittedly postmodern) reviews of (not often but occasionally postmodern) science fiction and fantasy novels, so let's just say that Lee and Roberts are similar in that they have both created an audience for their work which has no leverage over the direction or tone that the work takes. They are rebels, cocky malcontents, the scruffy transit-van-bands of their milieus: happy to work hard and merely scrape by, if that means they get to play only the stuff that really *moves* them, man.

Now, Roberts has a day-job as an actual professional professor of literature, which frees him from singing for his reviewer's supper; he's also a prolific and perennially misapprehended novelist, so he knows what it's like when the reviewing boot's on the other foot, so to speak. This is why the "guerilla" reviews within *Sibilant Fricative* are the most interesting and enjoyable, as they're unrestrained by expectations and protocol.

Roberts ranges wide in his reading and in his responses, showing off an intense engagement with any and every text that keeps your attention even when you suspect the text itself would not – I never thought I'd read an entire essay on Tolkein's unfinished experiments in Anglo-Saxon verse styles, for instance. And so, surrounding a couple of serious commissioned pieces on Philip K. Dick and some more reverent readings of J.R.R., we largely find the acrobatics and mummery that "proper" criticism – academic or otherwise – is supposed to forsake. He grins, he laughs, he scowls, he scolds; he raises the roof, he chews the furniture; wild exaggeration gives way to blunt understatement; chin-stroking cogitation flips over into schoolyard silliness; literary modes are veered between, styles collide, and internet-native tactics are brought to bear: the overextended *metaphor-ad-absurdum*; the bizarre yet strangely apposite similes; the overlong semicolon'd list of phenomena; and, of course, the puns. (Dear god, *the puns*.)

But my very favourite quality of Roberts's roguish reviews is perhaps best hinted at by a series of questions that might be asked by an aggrieved fan of the works under consideration. "Why," one might ask, "would one write such a fruitily exaggerated and maximalist review of Ian Watson's (legendarily de-canon'd) *Warhammer 40,000* tie-in novel? Why would one write so many extensive, wheezingly over-detailed and dutiful instalments of an assessment of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series? Why wax lyrical in imitation of Greer Gilman's prose in *Cloud and Ashes*, only to mock the dialogue through mimicry? Why respond to Connie Willis's tendency to anachronistic info-dumping with a nit-picky list of corrections to such?"

(It might help if I remind you that the jester gets away with saying the otherwise unsayable in the presence of the court, precisely because his foolish comportment and merry mimicry easily convince those who are seduced only by surfaces to discount the substance of his speech.)

As such, *Sibilant Fricative* embodies a solid argument in favour of the negative review as a vital component of literary discourse, and as a literary artform in its own right: amidst the conformity of late-late capitalist culture, any deviation from the purely pedestrian, whether "good" or "bad", deserves to be discussed in as engaging a manner as possible. Indeed, that's how novelties like the novel itself – initially dismissed as French frippery, y'know – make their way to the attention of the wider public, through coverage positive and negative alike. It's almost as if most people prefer to read other opinions and then make up their minds for themselves, in a sort of cheery defiance of people who tell them whether or not they should like a thing.

People, eh? Tsk.

IRREGULARITY
edited by Jared Shurin
Jurassic London pb, 303pp, £12.99

Jack Deighton

Irregularity is an anthology of short stories inspired by the history of science from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries and intended to coincide with an exhibition, *Ships, Clocks and Stars, The Quest for Longitude*, at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

The prologue, 'Irregularity' by Nick Harkaway, which sets the tone, has a woman bequeathed a library in which she finds a book which bears a cover described as similar (to all intents and purposes identical) to the one we are reading, not only relating her life story up to that point but also seeming to tell her future. In the afterword, Richard Dunn and Sophie Waring broadly define science as the search for nature's laws in order to codify them and ask what happens when things don't fit. (Answering that last question is actually the most important scientific endeavour.) *Irregularity*'s contents are about just such attempts to understand the world. As a coda, positioned after the afterword and which could easily be missed by a less than careful reader, an "email" to the editor comments on the impossibility of a book that loops back on itself.

The authors have interpreted their remit widely, the stories ranging from SF through fantasy to horror. Some could fall under the rubric of steampunk or alternative history. The literary antecedents being what they are it is perhaps not surprising that the majority lean towards the form of journal or diary extracts and epistolary accounts. And so we have the inevitable pastiche of Samuel Pepys, M. Suddain's 'The Darkness', set in a steampunk 17th century with radio, telemessages and air defence antenna arrays, where the French are experimenting with Darke Materials, Restoration London has Tunnelcars and Skycars and a Black Fire of nothingness has begun to eat the city.

Of course, encountering well-known names is one of the pleasures of an anthology like this and there are plenty more to conjure with. Two for the price of one in Adam Roberts's 'The Assassination of Isaac Newton by the Coward Robert Boyle', a piece of Robertsian playfulness in which Boyle has had access to modern physics (even discoursing with Brian May, whom Boyle says Newton resembles) and wishes to preserve the more human cosmogony which Newton's work will displace. Chock full of allusion – including an extended riff on 'Bohemian Rhapsody' – this story might just possibly be too knowing for its own good. Charles Darwin appears in Claire North's 'The Voyage of the *Basset*' where we follow him on his second sea voyage, utilising his knowledge of the *lycaenidae* to ensure nothing can mar the glory of Queen Victoria's coronation. Ada Lovelace helps produce steam-driven animatronic dinosaurs in Simon Guerrier's 'An Experiment in the Formulae of Thought', while 'Fairchild's Folly' by Tiffani Angus muses on the possible classification of love within a taxonomy via the epistolary relationship between Carl Linnaeus and Thomas Fairchild, who crossed a sweet william with a carnation to produce a sterile plant dubbed Fairchild's mule. In Kim Curran's 'A Woman out of Time' unnamed creatures relate how they prevented Émilie du Chatelet from disseminating modern Physics too early. 'A Game Proposition' by Rose Biggin has four women get together once every month to play a game which decides the fate of ships, incidentally giving William Dampier the knowledge to compile his atlas of the trade winds. The most chilling tale is perhaps Roger Luckhurst's 'Circulation', wherein a book-keeper is sent out from London to the island of San Domingue to investigate irregularities in the returns from the plantations there and comes upon the secrets of circulation as discovered by "the wizard Sangatte".

Elsewhere: in Linnaean-era Stockholm a young girl has dreams of the future, inspired by spiders; a maker of maritime clocks, in competition with Harrison for the Longitude prize, uses a variety of gruesome fluids to fine tune his escapement; a taxonomist travels to Southern Africa to seek out unusual beasts and finds the egg of a creature variously called gumma, gauma, gomerah, ghimmra, sjeemera; a found manuscript story with not one but two introductions suggests a reason for the rebuilding of St Paul's Cathedral after London's Great Fire on a realigned axis; an artist and his apprentice, commissioned to depict an anatomy lesson, witness the subject's heart beating after death.

The stories work well in their own terms, but in totality are rather relentlessly *olde worlde*.

SOLARIS RISING 3
edited by Ian Whates
Solaris pb, 384pp, £7.99

Matthew S. Dent

One has to salute Solaris for the *Solaris Rising* series of anthologies. Whatever you think of the relative quality of the stories within – and with any collection there are bound to be ones which don't meet particular tastes – they are flying the flag for short stories, which are in this reviewer's opinion an under-appreciated art form. I haven't actually read the previous volumes, so I can't offer any sort of comparison between them. I am, perhaps mercifully, limited to giving my views on the various stories contained within this volume. The contents page gives a very strong first impression, with a list of mostly familiar names.

Chris Beckett, for instance. His offering here is 'The Goblin Hunter', which takes the idea of pest control extraterrestrial. On an alien world, a human colony is plagued by native creatures which psychically manifest feelings of terror. The tension between the environmentalists trying to conserve the native fauna and the colonists having to live with them is well played out, alongside a brutally dark backdrop which brings out the true horror of the concept. Exactly how I like my SF.

'Popular Images from the First Manned Mission to Enceladus' by Alex Dally MacFarlane is a bit more on the experimental side, reading like one of those coffee table books of a gallery exhibition. Charting a fictional (obviously) expedition to the titular Saturn moon through the artistic propaganda produced, it tells a story with similar themes to those in Beckett's story: environmentalism versus a version of pragmatism. The choice emerging from how to treat the resources and life on the planet is one which rings powerfully with the choice that an expanding humanity will have to face, and manages to put across views in an un-preachy way. The power, of course, being that it deals with issues relevant today and (perhaps) tomorrow through an off-beat narrative, and clearly earns its place in this anthology.

'Red Lights and Rain' by Gareth L. Powell takes a fair old crack at arguably the most overdone of genre stories, the vampire story. With, of course, an SF twist. Perfectly adapted guerrillas from a far-future war, rippling backwards in time. It manages to work action into the piece alongside the concept. And whilst the melding of the vampire legend with science-fictional staples is hardly the newest of ideas, it is well executed and culminates in a note not a thousand miles away from the likes of *I Am Legend*. In the end, it can be hard to tell who the monster is.

The emotional tone which drives 'They Swim through Sunset Seas' by Laura Lam was something that really came out of nowhere. The letter-to-a-deceased-spouse format that it adopts feels a little clichéd to begin with, but manages to morph into something altogether more tense and primal. The rage of a researcher against a possibly intelligent alien species after it kills her husband makes for a nice backdrop to a story which puts human emotions in an entirely alien environment. Tempered a little – only a little – by the fact that, to this reader, the husband died through his own stupidity, but nonetheless a good story undeserving of my initial scorn.

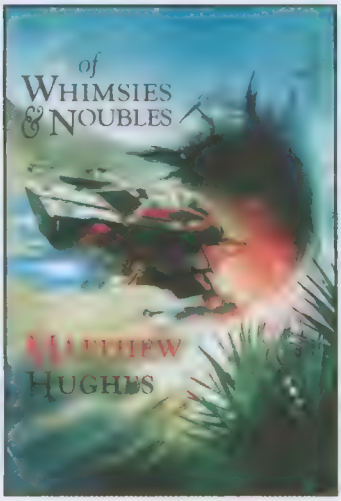
One thing I wasn't expecting was a Vietnam War story. Well, it isn't that exactly, but Cat Sparks' 'Dark Harvest' has a lot of the same atmosphere. A squad of soldiers plug away at genetically modified terrorists that they aren't sure even exist. It's a dull grind of a story, in the good sort of way. I liked the way that it built its atmosphere, with a lightness of touch and a distance which made the not-at-all surprising ending actually fairly weighty.

Praise is clearly due to Ian Whates for assembling a snapshot of the pinnacle of the genre in one collection. It has a few established big hitters – who definitely pull their weight – as well as a plethora of rising stars. It is entirely within the scope of imagination that some of them could be the cover names next time.

I found Whates' introduction fascinating too, explaining the process by which he went about recruiting, how each of the authors represented came to be here. It's a little glimpse behind the curtain into a world that I had seen little of, and which I appreciated.

You can't, in the end, go wrong with a collection like this. Taking the best in the business and making a tapestry of their work is going to produce something interesting, and always something good. And *Solaris Rising 3* does not disappoint.

SACRIFICE ON SPICA III
Eric Brown
PS Publishing jhc unsigned/signed, 79pp, £12/£25



OF WHIMSIES & NOUBLES
Matthew Hughes
PS Publishing jhc unsigned/signed, 74pp, £12/£25

Peter Tennant

Sacrifice on Spica III is the second volume in Eric Brown's Telemass Quartet, following on from *Famadihana on Fomalhaut IV* which I reviewed back in #252 (anyone care to lay odds on whether the third volume will also have an alliterative title and number II?). Former policeman Matt Hendrick is still planet hopping in search of his ex-wife Maatje, her lover and the remains of his daughter. But Spica III is about to enter its winter phase, when the human habitants are forced below ground and all transmission off planet ceases; if Matt misses the last transmission he'll be stuck there for five years.

For a travelling companion he hitches up with old buddy Ed Miller, with whom he served on the force. Ed is now freelance and going to Spica III in search of suspected murderer Katerina Nordstrom, the wife of their former commanding officer and a woman with whom Matt had an affair when he was much younger. So far, so coincidental – "Of all the ice planets, in all the systems, in all the universe, she hides on mine". And, just as with Fomalhaut IV, Spica III is the home base for an unusual religion, the Acolytes of the Ice, who seek a kind of nirvana come redemption of sins by exposing themselves to the intense cold of the planet's surface and getting transformed into beautiful ice flowers.

Okay, as you can probably infer from my synopsis, it feels like there's a little too much coincidence in this story, with several people from Matt's past simultaneously gallivanting off to the same remote planet for the most specious of reasons. And the whole thing with Matt chasing Maatje seems like simply a pretext to get him to Spica III, as it's pretty much glossed over for the main stretch of the narrative. There is however a strong suggestion that Ed Miller and some of the events described here might figure in the greater story arc, so I won't start pointing the finger at author Brown for padding his Quartet with what should have been a standalone adventure just yet.

All such quibbles aside, Brown is as good as ever at generating a true sense of wonder, allowing us to marvel at the complexity and diversity of creation. His descriptions of Spica III, both the colony cities in which mankind survives and the unforgiving winter landscape beyond the domes, is gripping, presenting a world that is totally inhospitable to human beings and yet where we have still managed to tenaciously carve out a niche for ourselves. Mention in passing is made of the Marl, the native species that ruled the planet before humans came, but they are largely left off stage, their role simply to supply the myths and sacred texts that humans reinvented as Acolytes of the Ice. Brown paints this religion in terms of sacrifice and transformation, with gorgeous descriptions of the flowers that devotees become, but all the same it is a nihilistic faith and one with a strong undercurrent of masochism.

And as far as that goes, another theme of the book is that strange as the universe may be the human animal can always give it a run for its money, which is my cue for the complex figure of Katerina Nordstrom to take centre stage. Matt cannot believe that the woman he once loved is capable of murder, but the old Matt was an ingénue of sorts when it comes to human nature, and the rich, complicated characterisation of his former lover confers a strand of dark psychology on the story, one that takes it into chilling waters. I guessed the end reveal, and I suspect most readers will, but that didn't in any way spoil the story, so as I said when reviewing *Fomalhaut*, I'm intrigued to see where Brown will take the action

next. I just hope that he gets back on point with the hunt for Maatje.

I can't recall where, but I'm sure I saw somebody once compare Matthew Hughes and his creation Luff Imbry to the dynamic duo of Jack Vance and Cugel the Clever, and there's some truth to that comparison, even if Hughes doesn't quite have the same vim when it comes to capturing the essence of exotic locales that was Vance's trademark. At least on the evidence provided by latest novella *Of Whimsies & Noubles*.

The corpulent Imbry is an art forger and conman, and this story finds him on the planet New Gargano seeking to swindle a local worthy out of his stash of noubles, precious stones of fabulous worth that will net our hero a fortune back on Old Earth. But Imbry is himself the subject of a sting, and ends up on a prison planet doing hard labour mining noubles, an activity with a limited lifespan. Naturally our hero manages to find a way out of his predicament and turn the situation to his financial advantage, albeit not quite in the way he initially envisaged.

This is an entertaining story with an engaging rogue for a hero, even if I suspect that in the real world his counterpart would be a Wall Street wide boy and I'd want to throw him off a high building to see if he bounced. Imbry is somebody who doesn't do anything without figuring the profit margin first, but author Hughes balances the books so that his profit invariably means helping the poor and deserving, while robbing the rich, or at least those richer and less deserving than himself. Imbry's love of fine living and gourmet cuisine in particular help to flesh the character out by giving him a fastidious quality and foibles that are endearing. He is also a polymath, with a keen understanding of human nature, something he doesn't hesitate to exploit, and the intellectual capability to get a handle on things like whimsies, the black holes that enable space transportation.

While Imbry is the focus of the book, there are some interesting minor characters and a wealth of detail, with the way in which our hero traduces the prison authorities a master class in manipulation. Add to the mix heavily armed mercenaries, intelligent spaceships and the threat of being consumed alive, and you have a short work that covers a lot of ground, all of it presented in an elegant and easy going prose style that effortlessly carries the reader along with it to the satisfying conclusion. I'll be sure to look out for more work from the pen of Matthew Hughes.

LASER FODDER

TONY LEE

X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

LITTLE LOST ROBOT

SPIRITED AWAY

THE CONGRESS

PATEMA INVERTED

LEFT BEHIND

BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP

THE GIVER

BEYOND

EJECTA

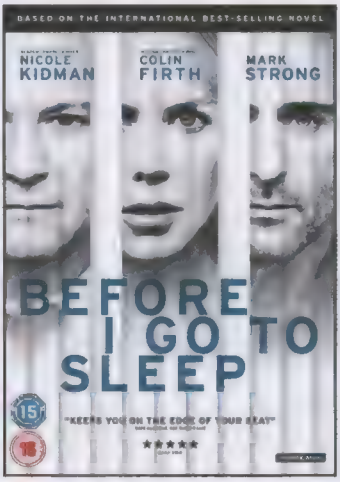
It was the jest of times, it was the cursed of times. Splicing the *Terminator*/*Trancers* matrix into Marvel's mutant lore, Bryan Singer returns to the franchise he started (in 2000), but **X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST** (Blu-ray/DVD, 10 November) has its work cut out for it because this movie aims to link the original trilogy with prequel *X-Men: First Class*. While combining casts of reckless Eric and smug über-competent Prof X, it's a shattering rewrite of American history X, as timelines established by said trilogy and its Wolverine spin-offs sees a devolutionary tragedy (of *X-Men: The Last Stand*) briskly shunted aside in favour of a new hope, presented as utopian futurism.

It was the pest of times, it was the versed of times. After that misguided dwarf star from *Game of Thrones* invents a Sentinel army of robot assassins, there's poetic injustice for the 21st century's most endangered super-species as the predatory action of everybody's doppelgänger, Mystique ('J-Law' failing to bring anything new to blue-skinned villainy), must be opposed by Jackman's Logan, the most accomplished killer of them all, against a 1970s backdrop and Nixonite arms-race fiasco. While speedster Quicksilver's raid on the Pentagon and Magneto's levitation

of a stadium to blockade the White House deserve first and second prizes for spectacular set-pieces, the basic plot flashes through acid-testing eras, with some clumsily structured chaptering for a climactic leveraging of moralistic influence that changes the world, while also foisting a generation-spanning anti-technology policy on the *X-Men* movie-universe's revised storyline. It had to happen, I suppose. Following rebooted Spider-Man and Superman franchises, here's a multilayered treatment of superhero cinema specially formulated for comics fans who revel in ret-con diversity, playing chicken-and-egg with character building moments and recursive imagery.

It was the nest of times, it was the nursed of times. Does time-travel really heal wounds of the psyche? Will the epilogue of resurrections withstand closer scrutiny, or is a generic paradox-clause acceptable, as simplistic hand-waving excuse for feel-good closure, because it offers deliverance from intolerance that's an anything-is-permitted result to be made welcome after so much persecution angst? By 2016, the 1980s looks doomed in *X-Men: Apocalypse* anyway.

The only surviving tape (thirteen other episodes were not so lucky!) from British anthology TV series *Out of This World*, **LITTLE LOST ROBOT** (DVD, 24 November) is based upon Asimov's story first published in 1947. Introduced by genre icon Boris Karloff, this 1962 adaptation begins with Saturn's tech-lab contretemps leading to a case of identity confusion. Top robo-shrink Dr Susan Calvin (Maxine Audley, *Peeping Tom*) is called in to deal with a reprogrammed machine that hides in plain sight. Of course, with a roomful of droids, the tin-man suits are decidedly basic, but *Little Lost Robot* has redeeming features of an intelligently constructed plot, which playfully interrogates familiar Cold War spy-games about the challenges of discovering a 'mole' before a specific mission deadline, and there's also an engaging metaphor about a slaves' revolt, complete with a variant of the "I'm Spartacus" moment. Although the original short fiction appeared just before Alan Turing's paper on artificial intelligence (1950) that gave science the 'Turing test', Asimov demonstrated

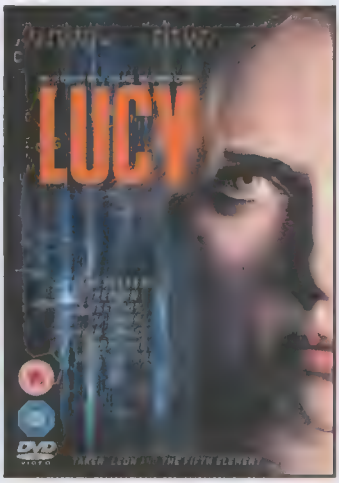


considerable prescience in his SF detective work, and so it's no surprise that his theoretical 'laws of robotics' became widely influential.

Armchair misanthrope Dr Calvin maintains her intellectual pursuit to the very end, with only a brief moment of telltale human weakness, and her rigorously ethical attitude towards the capabilities of a positronic brain eventually solves the immediate problem, and confidence in its own superiority proves to be the rebel robot's undoing, in a "one of us" gambit. Elements from *Little Lost Robot* were folded into Alex Proyas' actioner *I, Robot* (2004), but polluted by empty Hollywood spectacle and Will Smithy stuff. This TV offering minors in production standards but majors in studious writing of a fascinating puzzle.

The single-disc release by BFI includes audio tracks from *Cold Equations* (Tom Godwin's classic also became an episode of the 1980s' *Twilight Zone* revival, and then a watchable movie in 1996), and Philip K. Dick's *Impostor*, scripted by Terry Nation. Gary Fleder's android movie *Impostor* (2001) reworked that with a measure of success.

Despite its fantasia of dizzily surrealistic visions, the 'stench of humans' still pervades Hayao Miyazaki's animated opus **SPIRITED AWAY** (Dual Format, 24 November). This hit movie's dream-logic parameters, and moral configurations of its quirky neo-Disney affect, never manage to evade, let alone escape from, underscoring of pratfall humour and archetypal Japanese tweeness. Even with a plot centred on child labour and slavery to apparently malevolent power, this is a fairy tale with a blithely juvenile take on social politics. Bright pastel shades dominate cheerful anthropomorphism, or trans-species morphing, that denotes the likeably modern folklore realm of simplistic characterisations. In a contradictory manner, spectres of doom (the muddy river-god that oozes purple slime and vomits up flood-plain detritus is well depicted) turn the young heroine's ordeal of workhouse-captivity into an otherworldly experience that is as enlightening as it is perilous. However, for every scary monster or scene of spewing horrors, there is a tribble-ishly cute soot-ball or a talking frog. Impressive attention to detail in static background artwork is rarely matched by anime 'action' and frequently the movie lapses into motionless pans across frames with blandly obvious stereotypes or directorial heavy-handedness refocusing our attention. In the end, charmingly airy Ghibli nonsense like this hardly deserves its classic cartoon status.



Ever since popular successes *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) and Ralph Bakshi's cult-worthy *Cool World* (1992) showed us what movies that combine animation with live-action could be in terms of contrasting or blending together dreams and reality, the fantastic possibilities of mixing such mediums into a single narrative has, largely, been unfairly neglected. Superior in many ways (certainly a more fully mature genre picture) to any Ghibli production, **THE CONGRESS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 8 December) is a partly animated feature based on a novel by Stanislaw Lem. Robin Wright plays herself, a jobless actress reluctantly signing away all of her mid-life career prospects ("Technophobia never got human nature anywhere") for a digital-scan contract that sells her likeness to a studio mogul (Danny Houston).

Twenty years later (deep in 'Rebel Robot Robin, Street Fighter' era), she drives into the sketchy VR zone of a crazily surreal toony-verse, and checks into a corporate hotel for a nervous breakdown, before discovering she is now a marketable substance (think *Antiviral*, not *SimOne*) for a milkshake version of consumable identity. There is an impassioned speech about freedom, prompting assassination, terrorism, and an inevitable revolution against oppressive reality, that results in hallucinogenic lunacy (with cockroaches playing poker, etc) and acid-trip rom-com.

Director Ari Folman proofs sci-fi tech systems that deconstruct acting 'futures' (as a tradable commodity), and Harvey Keitel is great as Wright's manipulative agent, but the movie could do without its dreadful Leonard Cohen song. The metaphysics of a joyous wonderland suggests "symmetry contradicts art", and cartoon time is mostly subjective in vivid chemical highs that out-weird Miyazaki, with questing imagination to spare. Its dreams within dreams generate almost as much narrative confusion as a best of David Lynch, so it becomes harder for Robin to return from the other side and confront "the filth of truth". Boasting a variety of stylistic/genre influences, from the Wachowskis, and 1980s culture (pop icon Grace Jones visits; Reagan reports weather on TV) to Mamoru Oshii (*Avalon* in particular), this is a visual and thematic marvel, with boundless hope equalled by seemingly infinite despair unevenly balanced by wry amusements galore. Fans of Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* should find much to enjoy here.

"Sinners fall into the sky." **PATEMA INVERTED** (Blu-ray/DVD, 29 December) is a modestly appealing anime feature with top quality artwork, but sometimes quite poor animation with frame-rates of actual movement that are hardly much better, at times, than your average motion-comic production. It's fascinating, primarily, for its science fantasy ideas centred on twinned dystopian realms exposed by a catastrophe after the experimental flight of a levitation machine. A student named Age lives in a conveyor-belt world of strict law and order beneath a reportedly malevolent sky. Plucky heroine Patema is from an upside-down reality, and she emerges from an underground city to disrupt Age's life and provoke as many radical social changes as any sci-fi protagonist could be expected to.

However, the movie's creator, Yasuhiro Yoshiura (*Pale Cocoon*), seems far less interested in exploring the mechanics of anti-gravity tech, parallel worlds, or cosmic/philosophical metaphors for divergent politics/oppositional religions, and rather too concerned with twee rom-com about youngsters from strange places. Ignoring such a dichotomy of perspectives is forgivable, though, as Yoshiura's fable about standing on the ceiling – and shouting 'love' at this heartless world – showcases vertiginous thrills, perceptual quakes, and sufficient novelty to hold even my nonchalant attention span. The charm of all this fairy tale innocence means nothing whatsoever is implied by the frequency that our two rebellious adolescents, Age and Patema, cling to each other in a '69' position so they can go 'flying' together.

Veteran stuntman Vic Armstrong, director of cult action movie *The Joshua Tree* (aka *Army of One*), takes a break from supervising stunts on the latest 'Jack Ryan' thriller to helm a Nicolas Cage vehicle, **LEFT BEHIND** (DVD/Blu-ray, 5 January), that sets up its mystery via scriptured evangelism before Cage's pilot even leaves the airport on a flight to London. The mass disappearance might be the Rapture, alien abduction, or any other implausibly outlandish conspiracy theory with a name. Adapting to a genre shift, from cascading disasters to global apocalypse, the pilot's daughter Chloe (Cassi Thomson, *Grave Halloween*) becomes our designated young heroine, whose smartphone compass-app saves the day for Cage's endangered jet, at least, but this plane-crash feature about crackpot beliefs and equally nut-job reality plays like a 1990s TV movie. "If you look hard enough, you'll see whatever it is you're looking for." A classic deepity!

Is an identity only the sum of what we know, or are we a lot more than our memories? Unlike the fascinating puzzle of Christopher Nolan's first genre hit *Memento*, Rowan Joffe's **BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP** (Blu-ray/DVD, 12 January) is by comparison just a Hitchcockian drama. It's very competently made, as a British based production with slick Hollywood style, but as sentimental mystery that becomes psychological thriller its genre content is resolutely unexceptional.

Christine (Nicole Kidman) suffers confusion and fear every day because all her memory of the last twenty years is gone when she wakes up in the morning. Her life's now turned into fiction, a story to be learnt afresh, repeatedly – the opposite of *Groundhog Day*. Freedom from any guilt seems to be a positive, but what does grief mean to her? Why did forgotten best friend Claire desert poor Chris? Is she still actually married to or divorced from Ben (Colin Firth)? Could the apparently well-intentioned Doc Nasch (Mark Strong) be taking advantage of her? What really happened to Chris' reportedly dead son Adam? Who is the man with a scar that haunts her dreams? Most crucially, perhaps, how does an amnesiac like Chris keep a secret?

After building up to a couple of clever, and yet fairly predictable, plot twists, it all jumps to the conclusion of a post-traumatic happy-ending composed of 95 percent pure mush.

Australian-born director Phillip Noyce has always kept his distance from overtly sci-fi movies. Although thrillers like Kidman's milestone *Dead Calm*, the Eszterhas-cursed *Sliver* and Harrison Ford showcases about Tom Clancy's 'Jack Ryan' often stretched credibility, it's only Noyce's spy-fi actioner *Salt*, *The Saint* remake (with a cold fusion macguffin) and the *Zatoichi*-derivative adventure *Blind Fury* – with Rutger Hauer as the sightless swordsman – that approached more fantastical themes so different from his docudrama (*Newsfront*), ozploitation classic (*Heatwave*) and romantic mysteries (*The Quiet American*) that provide such an intriguing diversity to his filmmaking CV. Adapted from a novel by children's author Lois Lowry, Noyce's first full-blown SF drama **THE GIVER** (Blu-ray/DVD, 19 January) is a tale of youthful rebellion, set in a perfectly ordered and tightly policed community that masquerades as utopia. It is a blithely conceptualised, ill considered mix of *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Logan's Run* and Shyamalan's *The Village*. Meryl Streep on post-apocalypse soma leads the wholly retarded future where real life has been socially engineered out of existence. Based on principles of honesty, harmony and contentment without knowing any truth, Noyce's entry-level sampler of genre themes ironically wraps the pretensions of a fable in b&w sequences of a cold heaven that lacks perspective. The plateau city-state seems like an enclave for pod people until their new 'receiver of memory' Jonas (Brenton Thwaites, *Oculus*) learns about difference, creativity and rudeness, while personally challenged with rediscovering a spectrum of light and beauty and wonder and horror in a secret history. Keeper of the archives Jeff Bridges does his best mentoring voice, delivering memory transfers, not from his library (because reading is just boring cinematically, right?), but as VR experience for the frequently bewildered trainee-politician Jonas.

Ambushed by dreams and teen romance (pouty Odeya Rush plays a weightless heroine), *The Giver* turns uncomfortably daft whenever Noyce attempts to frame any of science fiction's philosophical tracts, using just colours that bleed into focus points. This risks crippling the slight success of such stilted storytelling and so, too often, *The Giver* seems deeply flawed, trite, and lacking wisdom beyond the nursery. "The hippo is really an elephant." The ruinously bad ending, involving motorbikes chasing cradle snatcher Jonas, contrasts the state's execution of a 'juvenile delinquent' with reckless endangerment of the messianic baby by escaping 'freedom-fighter' Jonas presented as heroic adventure. If nothing else, however, *The Giver* deserves some admiration as it champions the sadly neglected novelty of a mass-educational, telepathic infodump as revolutionary denouement!

A tedious apocalypse, British sci-fi romance **BEYOND** (DVD, 12 January) appears to be inspired by the runaway success of Gareth Edwards' *Monsters*, but the writing and directing team of Joseph Baker and Tom Large fail to recapture any of that eerie alien invasion movie's low-budget charm or cut-price yet impressive spectacle. Hysterically bad, with a broken storyline that bleeds pretension through a cloying fog of boredom, *Beyond* suffers from endlessly talky scenes and witless main characters. At least Mike Cahill's *Another Earth* posited an interesting backdrop for its relationship drama.

Painfully dull shockumentary **EJECTA** (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 January) is the latest from the variable Tony Burgess, the writer of Bruce McDonald's great weird-zombie movie *Pontypool*. This, however, is just a Blair-witchy UFOlogy flick, burdened with witless direction of ridiculously bad action scenes and laughably inept performances. There's mumbled dialogue, thumping or droning noises that fail to pass as a soundtrack, and the twin blunders of nuisance jitter-cam and pointless night-vision sequences. Flying blindly, across subgenre territories, on a collision course with failure, this is a terribly disappointing exercise in violent encounters of the third-rate kind.

LATE ARRIVAL

LUCY (DVD/Blu-ray, 12 January). Scarlett Johansson stars, Luc Besson directs. *Reviewed by Nick Lowe in issue #254.*

"a refreshingly broad range of style and tones... passionately prophetic and entrancingly enigmatic... its idiosyncratic tales of terror tap into the fears, anxieties and uncertainties of the current zeitgeist." - *Interzone*

"a gritty verisimilitude... touching on the nature of evil... with some pointed satire as a bonus... a convincing feel to the science and an engaging sense of amorality to the character of the narrator" - *Black Static*

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MUTANT POPCORN

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INTERSTELLAR

THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM: SECRET OF THE TOMB

THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY PART 1

HORNS

THE REMAINING

OUIJA

WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS

So you're going to do it. You're going to aim for the stars and set out to make that once-in-a-generation science fiction milestone. You have the budget, the boffins, the cinematic skillset, and two major studios behind you. You've made three or four credible classics, including a plausible candidate for the finest adaptation of an sf novel this century. You're the only filmmaker delivering original standalone blockbusters which make the kind of silly money otherwise reserved for franchised properties. They're saying you're the new Kubrick, only you finish films on schedule and under budget. If not you, now, then who ever?

What you actually end up with is **INTERSTELLAR**, a film of thrilling ambition and grandeur punctured in multiple places by baffling failures of imaginative nerve and a surprisingly shaky grasp of how narrative translates science into wonder. On the one side, we have intergalactic travel (the title is if anything overmodest) in IMAX with old-school in-camera effects to a thunderous Hans Zimmer score. We have wormholes, black holes, a neutron star, and a string of gravity-driven speculative wowsers from the man who literally wrote the book on gravitation. We have three alien worlds, with tides as high as mountains and frozen ammonia clouds you can scrape your lander against. We have proper time dilation and relativistic relationship plotting, and a stunningly conceived climax involving the folding of the entire film in five-dimensional space into a three-dimensional representation with time as a

manipulable physical spatial dimension. We have the most ambitious infodumps of hard-sf plotting ever seen on film, including the most authoritative visualisation of a wormhole ever seen on screen and blackboards filled with functioning equations in Kip Thorne's own autograph handwriting. We warm up with apocalyptic prequel to *The Road* in which the Earth has been dustbowled into magic-hour Americana. But we also have a shonky, derivative, and porous plot that seems unable to think past *2001* and *Contact*, which between them throttle the narrative with their dead-hand grip; a studio-compliant ticklist of familial tropes, including dead moms all round and multiple servings of father-son baggage (switched out to father-daughter in the Nolan draft, but without so

much as a change of name); Anne Hathaway's monologue on love, which explosively decompresses the entire film's pretence to rationalist scruples; and above all a mysterious shortage of actual cosmic awe, with even the alien worlds turning out in practice to be yet more barren digital enhancements of Iceland.

But to judge this film by the scale of its ambitions would be ungenerous. Nolan is the one director who continues to push at the limits of the blockbuster, exploring what can be done with insane budgets and topnotch talent, and after the disappointingly linear and incoherent *Dark Knight Rises* he's here back with his signature narrative experiments in the ways that film can fold stories in time. All the same, his *Interstellar* was always a rescue mission. The history of the project is reasonably well known, but bears recapping anyway because the layers remain so intriguingly distinct in the final film. The launch stage was a 2006 pitch by Kip Thorne and Lynda Obst arising out of their work together on *Contact* – LA being apparently the kind of town where one-third of the *Gravitation* triumvirate of Misner, Thorne, and Wheeler can be an old boyfriend of the producer of *Adventures in Babysitting* – which was picked up by Spielberg and their 37-page treatment given to Jonathan Nolan, who did three and a bit drafts on either side of the writers' strike before Spielberg's deal fell apart in 2010 and Paramount spent two and a half years wooing a wary Nolan major to take the wheel in his place. Once signed, Nolan wasted no time in heavily reworking everything but the first act of his brother's draft, with Thorne re-enlisted to cook custom equations to rationalise new plot turns grafted in from an unrelated Nolan project, and the script only finished in May 2013.

> We have three alien worlds, with tides as high as mountains and frozen ammonia clouds you can scrape your lander against

Not unusually for a project of this scale, it's been a stop-start process with periods of manic creation punctuated by long stretches of stuporous downtime, and a fair bit of it shows in the finished work, which is a mishmash of elements from different layers of its prehistory that only sometimes cohere. Jonathan Nolan's second draft, from 2008, is well known to the

Armies is a weaker film overall even than the earlier instalments gave to expect, at times seeming to lose the plot altogether

internet, and if we're honest was not up to much: Cooper and Brand go through the wormhole, find that a Chinese crew have beaten them to it and left their robots behind, and escape the hostile colony world with the help of some benign Spielberg aliens and a hefty amount of gravitational theory. Big brother's five-month stint on the script (all in 2013) has added two more planets, much more time slippage, and the whole tesseract sequence and associated time-twisting payoffs – though the ending, bizarrely, is the same as the 2008 draft, despite no longer making any kind of sense now that the wormhole is closed and the final scenes take place in separate galaxies. Nevertheless, it seems to have been Nolan who crucially saw that the coolest part of the premise was not the interstellar travel but the five-dimensional space of the Bulk and the nature of the beings that inhabit it; and whatever one thinks of the teary, manipulative, and all too Spielbergian execution of the payoff, Nolan deserves some credit for drawing on one of Thorne's key insights about the peculiar nature of gravity to ditch the godlike Spielberg xenodemiurges in favour of a more satisfying and, yes, wondrous intimation of transcended humanity of a kind familiar to sf but new to blockbuster film. It's not what it might have been, but it's still more than we reasonably might have expected.

The only other modern filmmaker who can get away with follies of grandeur on this scale finally signs off on his Tolkienian rap sheet in **THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES**, whose tin-eared insertion of a bonus article stands as Peter Jackson's last defiant gesture of not really getting it. Tolkien himself was sufficiently enamoured of the formulation "Battle of Five Armies" to fiddle at length with getting the number to come out, eventually settling on a fudge under which the orcs and wargs counted as two choices and the eagles and bears as none; but Jackson has introduced an eighth in the form of a second (or rather a first) orc army out of Dol Guldur, as opposed to Bolg's canonical one out of Gundabad – which does at least have the modest payoff of delivering an army for each of the fingers that audiences are counting on, though the Men get lost early in the mix and the bats and surprise sandworms seem to be non-qualifying extras. (The 1977 animated version, by the Japanese studio that would go on to become Ghibli, had already demoted the wargs, but switched in the eagles instead to make four against one.) Nevertheless, aside from the previously introduced plotlines of Tauriel and Azog to wind up, the novel's plotting is actually more faithfully followed here than in earlier instalments, even at the expense of cinematic narrative shapeliness. Thus the Necromancer is seen off early, leaving the second half of the film without its big bad, and his new master plan to use Erebor to

Stiller himself now doubles gratuitously up as his own Neanderthal doppelganger, with large browed chuckles to match

open up Angmar "because of its strategic position" is dead before it's belatedly revealed. Even the title fades from relevance as the battle on Ravenhill takes over from the Erebor action, Bilbo gets his canon blow to the head just as eucatastrophe strikes and the eagles are coming, and in a bizarre anticlimax the actual end of the Battle itself is banished in a series of fleeting longshot glimpses of Massive software performing indiscernible algorithms in the distance.

Obviously *Armies* is a weaker film overall even than the earlier instalments gave to expect, at times seeming to lose the plot altogether. The art team, cast, and craft armies all continue to deliver wonderfully, but Jackson and his floundering co-writers are visibly out of their depth, despite cleaving closer to source than in any of the films since *Fellowship*. But the problem isn't all of their making, and a lot of it comes simply from the spinning of one book into three films made from two, and from the limited choices available for splitpoints in the story. These final six chapters of the book take up only a fifth of Tolkien's text, and a quarter of that (the longest chapter, "Fire and Water") is over before the titles, leaving this instalment by far the thinnest in source material, even with the promotion to screentime of the White Council's confrontation with the Necromancer in Dol Guldur (one of the more effective sequences, despite Saruman's fighting style understandably involving rather a lot of back to camera; surely nobody could have anticipated Galadriel getting her all shall love me and despair back on). But Jackson's team have got quite good at padding, and the protracted politicking before Erebor passes surprisingly well, thanks to some effective if ultimately inconsequential milking of the tension between Bilbo and Thorin over the missing Arkenstone, and suitably deft teasing-out of the resonances in Tolkien's aftermath with more recent topplings of dictators squatting atop of giant piles of internationally plunderable resource.

As it happens, the opening titles come at more or less the exact point that Tolkien set the draft aside early in 1932, having found that the introduction of Bard and the displacement of Bilbo from the dragon-slaying climax had painted him into a narrative corner from which he eventually emerged with a major rethink of plot, tone, and theme which would ultimately make possible the modulation into a dark and enduring sequel; and Jackson and team have at least done a reasonable job of setting up the elements newly introduced in this afterthought phase, including Thorin's dragonsickness, the siege of Erebor, and the Battle of Five Armies itself, as well as the last-minute decision in the final typescript to kill off a couple more dwarves, which has left Jackson's people with a bit of a boobytrapped gift. That the Fili/Tauriel ship would end tragically seemed a given in view of their poignantly contrasting canonicities, but in the event Jackson pulls back from an ending that would force any direct

Mockingjay Part 1, latest in the looming years of broken-backed franchise subjects that have to spin a film out of the wrong half of a book

confrontation with Tolkien's lifelong indecision over the rights of dwarves to a place in the halls of Mandos, and the fans are paid off instead with some terrible elven dialogue, a thumpingly unanswered question dangling, and a gratuitous character shout-out that leaves Tolkienian chronology broken and bleeding. Regrettably, none of the cool things foreseen by optimists materialise: cameos from canon figures hitherto offstage, a place for the story of Thráin, glimpses of the shadow rebuilding and Gollum going abroad in quest of the precious. (When Saruman says "Leave Sauron to me" in the trailer, we didn't realise that was the last we'd hear of either.) Perhaps there'll be more in the extended edition, though more likely we'll just learn what became of Dwalin and the very tiresome Alfrid. For now, we should probably just give appropriate thanks for what we've received and be glad that it's finally over.

Another trilogic quest comes to a maudlin and unexpectedly topical end in **NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM: SECRET OF THE TOMB**, which traces the origin story of Ben Stiller's magic tablet to the year of *The Hobbit*'s first publication when even Dick van Dyke was a little boy, and reveals that the locals were anything but happy about its looting and export to an overseas museum, wailing as the crates were hauled away that "the end will come!" In the event, the scope of this apocalyptic prediction turns out somewhat bathetically to be restricted to the franchise rather than the world, as the tablet of revivification belatedly succumbs to a corrosive rot which can only be arrested by a daring act of cultural diplomacy that sends the cast on overseas loan to the British Museum to revive and interrogate the tablet's creator in the form of the Pharaoh Ben Kingsley. The titular Secret, once prised out of Sir Ben, turns out to be that his creation "was designed to channel Khonsu's rays down to the tablet", and "it's been away from Khonsu's light for too long", which you might reasonably take to imply that the only hope is to repatriate it to Egypt for a recharge. But it turns out to be much easier than that and a chase round the West End will get the job done; and at the end the tablet and the franchise get to stay in London permanently because the Pharaoh's family belongs together and the BM is only too happy to see antiquities reunited so long as they're here and not there. The Museum's cooperation, which we now know was going on while Neil MacGregor was negotiating the Hermitage loan and bracing for the Greek response, is confirmed by a sniffy disclaimer that "This film is a work of fiction and not all objects and galleries featured reflect the British Museum's collections and buildings," perhaps lest viewers be misled by the stunt-chase round Escher's *Relativity*. But you don't need Amal Clooney to appreciate the expert salting of international wounds by a brief sequence of the Parthenon marbles coming to life

and a centaur biffing a Lapith for all eternity.

The first of the franchise actually to engage, however ingenuously, with issues of museology and cultural property, *Secret of the Tomb* does offer some thoughts about what a museum is and the difference between the display of actual cultural treasures and lame wax dioramas of discredited colonialist fictions, two things that have been systematically confounded in the two earlier films. But the actual story is a complete mess, seemingly stitched together from a dozen different drafts and micturated studio notes by Dexter the capuchin's entire extended family. Rebel Wilson and Dan Stevens further destabilise the already hopelessly unwieldy cast, as Stiller's comedically supersized UK counterpart and a dashing but metaphysically unreflective Sir Lancelot who needs a brace of uncredited thespian cameos to persuade him of his own unreality ("Prepare to feel the cold kiss of my blade, Huge Ackman!"), while Stiller himself now doubles gratuitously up as his own Neanderthal doppelgänger, with latex-browed chuckles to match. Yet the overall tone is sentimentally elegiac, coopting the latenesses of Robin Williams and Mickey Rooney into a mawkish obsession with the franchise's own finality and need to move on, which finds itself mirrored in a grim subplot about Stiller's attempt to direct the course of his teenage son's life, apparently without any consultation of the mother who is actually raising him offscreen. (And of course the Amy Adams character from the end of the last film has simply dematerialised.) Meanwhile, does anyone remember a fellow called Milan Trenc, who once wrote, illustrated, and sold the rights to a book entitled *Night at the Museum*, since when he hasn't been sighted in credits and one imagines has not been seeing any of the cheques? Perhaps he could raise some cultural capital with a loan of the rights to Pyongyang.

The evocative North Korean stylings of *Catching Fire* have gone the way of District 12 in **THE HUNGER GAMES:**

It all worked much better on page 1066 of 1066, where the horns and other doodads couplings are in your face all the time.

MOCKINGJAY PART 1, latest in the booming genre of broken-backed franchise midquels that have to spin a film out of the wrong half of a book. Nothing much happens in this half of the novel, though the filmmakers have done what they can to make it stretch by taking advantage of the breaking of the novels' restricted first-person narration to insert yet more cutaways to President Snow and his minions, as well as some new backstage scenes in District 13 where Katniss' minders story-conference her performance as the rebel-rallying Mockingjay, and some additional Katniss-free action set pieces in other Districts, including a live staging of the rescue mission from chapter 12. Elizabeth Banks' Effie Trinket has been reinstated in the cast with a rewritten role in what is now credited as "Adaptation by Suzanne Collins", and the film makes the most

As of press time, the Sony email excavations have yet to drill down to who thought faith-based horror The Remaining was a good idea

of Katniss' one excursion to an action sequence in mid-film. But this is still essentially a film about mooching around in a big underground bunker waiting for the real film to start, while Katniss, her minders, and Natalie Dormer's surrogate director try to wrangle a performance out of her as she whiles away the time saving the proverbial cat (twice) and watching such story as there is unspool on big screens. Even more than *Catching Fire*, it's a strangely compelling *mise en abîme* about watching Jennifer Lawrence getting into character under the compound eyes of her handlers, crew, and audience to the point where she can carry a film by sheer screen presence alone, which on the whole she does. Surprisingly, though, most of this metaperformative eating-itself is fairly straight out of the book; and when the ending cuts from the promissory announcement-to-cheers ("Today we have freed the victors; tomorrow, Panem!") to Josh Hutcherson thrashing on his bed with his system full of trackerjacker-venomised acting poison, we can feel confident that this is indeed the kind of performance that will be able to overpower Donald Sutherland's regime of tyrannical grinning. Bring it on.

Another novelist-producer has supervised his own adaptation in horror vet Alexandre Aja's film of Stephen King scion Joe Hill's **HORNS**, which plays on film like a Fortean remix of *Gone Girl*. Daniel Radcliffe finds himself literally demonised for supposedly murdering his girlfriend, but unexpectedly equipped to track down the real killer once he learns that his mysteriously sprouting horns have the power to compel strangers to express their darkest urges and spill the telepathic beans on their secrets. It's a premise you just have to go with, as the film is even less interested than the novel in playing by conventional genre rules; and as Radcliffe's character turns increasingly into a kind of short and miserable version of Ghost Rider, his obtuseness in identifying the villain who was fingered from the start by the audience (and, in the novel, by himself) becomes a bit of an albatross, as does the insistent jukebox soundtrack, while the barmily overblown new ending dissipates what little sense the plot was making till then. It all worked much better on page than screen, where the horns and other devilish trappings are in your face all the time, the narrative has shed its power to enter other and more interesting heads than the hero's, the novel's conceit that he's actually turning into the real devil has been diluted for general consumption, and the tesseract treehouse in which space and time are folded round the moral dimensions of the narrative has been upgraded a happy place where love never dies. Though Aja and his performers push their range in interesting directions, the Lynchian vibes work more against the film than with it, with the

female principals all pushed out of the story and robbed of agency in a range of overtly or subtly abusive ways – the nastiest thing from the book to survive intact.

As of press time, the Sony email excavations have yet to drill down to who thought faith-based horror **THE REMAINING** was a good idea. But at least nobody could accuse this bizarre film of timidity in facing up to the ways in which tribulationist Christianity offers a genuinely terrifying vision of an utterly psychopathic deity, as a criminally underused Alexa Vega finds her wedding ruined by "The Rapture – right out of the New Testament of the Bible!", and the pious and innocent ascend while those who've been a bit lukewarm and not meant it enough ("I shouldn't be here! I went to church! I did everything right!") get left behind with the damned to be nastily picked off by the digital Fallen. Unbelievers still cling to their pathetic modern-day substitute faiths ("Maybe it's aliens!", since the actual plot is indeed a fairly by-numbers tour of invasion tropes), while secular media are baffled: "Leading experts around the globe have been unable to establish the cause of what is being called Instant Death Syndrome." In the kind of wishy-washy compromise that its own irritable God would surely judge with maximum harshness, the film dithers with found-footage inserts but plays mostly as omniscient diegesis; but after blowing most of the budget on the wedding sequence, the rest of the film is stuck with holing the survivors up in a besieged church and creeping round badly-lit hospital corridors ahead of a suspiciously dark, blurry, and offscreen pandemonic climax involving a lot of stabbing with cosmic tentacles from the sky. It's never shown where the adherents of other faiths, or indeed non-Caucasians, are in all this, presumably because any attempt to contemplate theologies or cultures outside white millennarian fundamentalism would introduce a thoroughly undesirable note of sanity and balance. More surprising is the fact that at no point does anyone crack out a firearm, which would swiftly determine whether the tentacles of judgment are proof against Hollywood's more fundamental fundamentalisms. The credits were evidently compiled in a bit of a rush, as they include the drivers twice; perhaps they were rushing to finish before the last times, or they just hoped that nobody would be left to watch them.

Ouija has quite a lot going for it, not least the casting of new queen of scream Olivia Cooke, who was particularly wonderful in The Signal

Completing a seasonal trilogy of strange adventures on the fringes of horror is Hasbro's latest attempt to monetise a flagging branded version of a public-domain property, which didn't work that well for them in *Battleship*. But with Michael Bay's Platinum Dunes and Blumhouse behind it, **OUIJA** is quite a cannily engineered pitch for a product which was always

What We Do in the Shadows, Jemaine Clements and Taika Waititi's mock-doc about four undead bachelor misfits sharing a Babadook mansion

one of the harder sells in the toymakers' portfolio, a vintage survival of Victorian spiritualism rebranded as a boardgame and marketed through toyshops as a safely juvenile pastime for those dark winter nights because, as the film is careful to reassure us, it's all science really: "It's known as the idiomotor effect. We're simply telling ourselves what we want to believe." In fact *Ouija* has quite a lot going for it, not least the casting of new queen of scream Olivia Cooke, who was particularly wonderful in last issue's *The Signal* and whose big worried brows and huge horror eyes are a face optimised for the expression of fear processed through purposeful thought. But the film gradually loses confidence in the power of the planchette to carry the film, reverting progressively to a boilerplate haunted-house narrative with *Final Destination* trimmings, and discarding even the twists on the Hasbro playing rules that seem set up as the basis for the plot.

A much more effective twist on heritage horror tropes comes in **WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS**, Jemaine Clements and Taika Waititi's mock-doc about four undead bachelor misfits sharing a gothic Babadook mansion in what is essentially what *Only Lovers Left Alive* would look like if it was happening in the Wellington suburbs and the Mia Wasikowska character was a moronic bloke from Upper Hutt. Starting as a series of amusing sketches about immortality, male flatsharing, and the cringey artificialities of staged-reality scenemaking, it gradually and artfully unfolds into an unexpectedly warm, plotful fable of friendship and outsiderhood as the bloodsucker crew discover what really matters in everlasting life that nevertheless could be cut off at any moment if you just pull back the wrong curtain. Waititi and Clements save the rarest cuts for themselves, as a painfully sweet dandy and a pitifully damaged man-beast ("Leave me to do my dark bidding on the internet!" "What are you bidding on?" "I'm bidding on a table"), and it all builds to a brilliantly engineered feelgood finale in which absolutely everyone finds redemption, acceptance, and an ending happier than even they sought, far less deserved. Though the film revels in its own marginality as a low-budget genre joke from the back corner of the world, it's thoroughly knowing about its place in the universe of cinema, and indeed Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh lead the thanks – even the cameras were rented from Wingnut – while room is even made for a passing parody of a famous Christopher Nolan moment. The end-credit gag (unseen by everyone else at my screening, so I don't think this is a spoiler) has the master vampire hypnotist tell the audience "You will not remember the last hour and a half of what you have just seen. You will forget the contents of this movie." In the cosmic scheme of things, that may be true; but it's still a lovely way to pass the time we have on earth.

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